

THE FUTURE OF (REMOTE?) WORK IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE

5 WAYS TO FIND A BALANCE BETWEEN REMOTE
AND IN-OFFICE PRESENCE IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE



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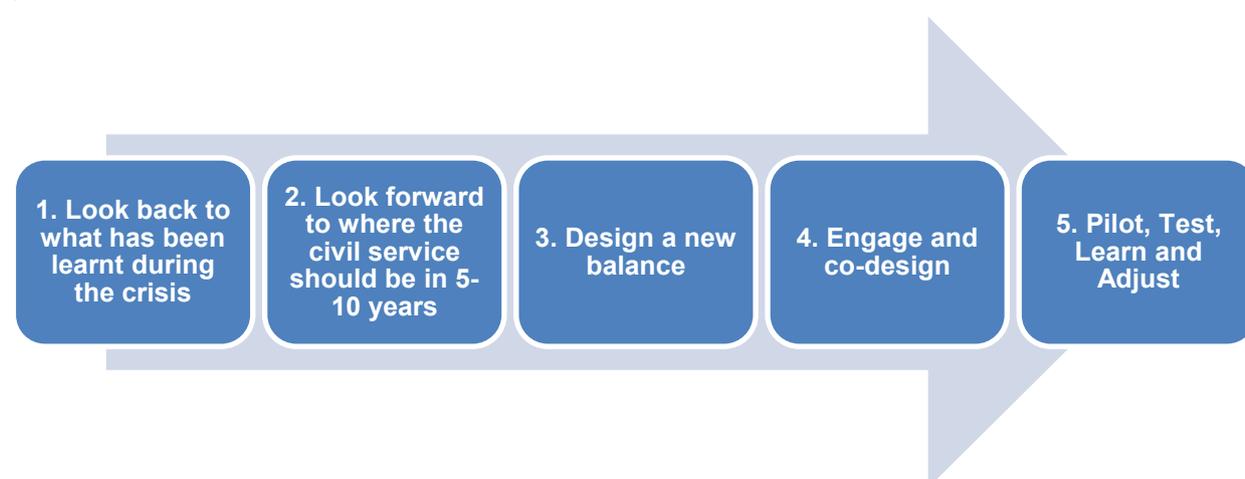
Finding a new balance between remote and in-office presence.

Hybrid working is the new normal. Most people are going to telework at least some of the time, and some all the time.

-Simon Kuper, Columnist, Financial Times

The COVID-19 crisis, has presented an unprecedented opportunity to experiment with new ways of working and to find a new balance of remote and in office presence in the future. Today, with vaccine strategies in many OECD countries beginning to provide new optimism for an imminent return to the office, the time is right to set a blueprint not just for returning to the office as it was before, but as it will be for years into the future. And this raises big questions: What has been learned about remote working in this last year? How do public servants expect to be working in the future? How can governments design new policies today to bridge the gap?¹

It may feel as if the COVID-19 crisis changed everything, however, many of the same workforce management challenges remain, but with new twists. Although returning to the office is an immediate and urgent operational planning challenge, taking a step back to remember what the issues were before the crisis, and how the crisis has changed our understand of these issues, could be a useful starting place. Then, the following five points provide guidance and inspiration to governments to design a new way of working that leverages lessons learned from the pandemic and contributes to the future of work in the public service.



¹ On June 03 2021, the OECD hosted a webinar to address some of these questions, featuring the senior public managers quoted throughout this paper, and moderated by Simon Kuper of the Financial Times.

1. Look back to what has been learnt during the crisis

We have learnt that we can function with less command and control. We can actually have more empowerment, autonomy and responsibility in our teams, and with quality results. But this also requires us to address new challenges, such as reinforced internal communication.

-Fatima Fonseca, Secretary of State for Innovation and Administrative Modernisation, Portugal

The crisis has, in many ways, been a massive imposed experiment on new ways of working, and many public service organisations have been conducting surveys and studies to better understand the potential benefits and/or risks of large-scale remote working in the public sector. Some of these lessons include the following:

Productivity

I feel very encouraged by the resilience of the public workforce. Not only did we manage through a pandemic, but also a change in administration, never taking our eyes off the mission of our organisations.

-Dustin Brown, Deputy Assistant Director for Management, Office of Management and Budget, United States,

At the beginning of the pandemic, when everybody was working from home, many studies (mostly in the private sector) showed rising employee productivity. For example, US Social Security Administration found the backlog of pending cases dropped 11 percent between March and May 2020, when the agency mandated full telework. It appears that cutting out the commute and the frequent interruptions by office mates resulted in workers having more time to focus on work; and individually, they got more done in the day.

However, organisational productivity is not simply the sum of individual productivity. For example, in a tech firm employees wrote more lines of code in a day at home than they did in the office. But then, a few months later, when it came time to weave all this code together into a coherent product, productivity declined. In fact they discovered that a greater number of hours were required to ensure interoperability across the various components which had been built in relative isolation. It turns out that all those interruptions and water cooler conversations amounted to measureable benefits for coordination and collaboration across teams. They often bridge gaps, spread information between groups, and contribute to overcoming siloes.

This is the kind of interaction that is very hard to create online. Anonymised collaboration trends from Microsoft between billions of Outlook emails and Microsoft Teams meetings reveal interesting patterns: the shift to remote working shrunk employees' networks. At the onset of the pandemic, the data shows that interactions among close networks at work increased, while interactions with more distant networks diminished.

Additionally, public services are far more diverse in jobs and people than many private sector firms. Some people and some jobs will be better suited to remote working than others, suggesting that any one-size-fits-all approach is bound to come up short of achieving its objectives. This past year should provide public sector organisations with new actionable insights on which types of tasks, positions and employees are better suited to remote work than others.

- ✓ Remote working requires a concerted focus on coordination and collaboration to ensure that individual effort contributes to organisational productivity

- ✓ The diversity of work and people in the public sector requires a high level of flexibility in the application of remote working rules – one size fits no one.

Before the crisis, we had a presence-based managerial model and remote working, if possible, was looked down upon. This was a big issue for women, because it was clear that if you had managerial ambitions, it was impossible to envisage remote working as an option. Remote working was part of the glass ceiling that separated women from managerial appointments. Today, the culture has totally shifted – not only is it possible, but the ability to manage remotely is highly regarded and valued.

- Nathalie Green, Assistant Director for HR Policy Development, Directorate for Administration and the Public Service, France

Health and well-being

Health and well-being are fundamental preconditions for productivity and resilience, and this health crisis has reinforced that. Adding to the obvious physical health risks from catching the coronavirus, are a range of mental health problems, which many experts suggest will continue for a significant minority of individuals long after the physical risks have been reduced.

Various studies point to a wide range of emergent mental health problems associated with the pandemic. Some stem specifically from trauma related to the virus, or from isolation measures that reinforce feelings of distance and loneliness. Others stem from the general sense of uncertainty brought on by the pandemic and are likely to reinforce feelings of stress and anxiety. Remote working itself also risks contributing to anxiety and stress, since those who work from home more often also report working more often on their own time, suggesting greater challenges in effectively separating work and home life.

This is, again, a highly individual concept – some people may have been able to improve wellbeing through better management of work-life balance at home, with more opportunities to exercise on their own schedules, for example. The important point is that personal choice, and flexibility is a fundamental contributor to mental health and wellbeing, and providing employees with a return to office that is flexible and adaptable to their individual needs, with heightened supports for an inclusive workplace, is a useful design principle going forward.

- ✓ Health and wellbeing, particularly mental health, will continue to be an important concern into the future and should underpin any working policy.
- ✓ Flexibility is the key to match individual needs and challenges.

Organisational culture and trust

One of the things that we have the opportunity to do is build on the massive level of trust we have built up with our employees – and work out how we can hard-code that into the employment relationship that we have with people.

-Simon Claydon, Director of People, Capability and Change, Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government, United Kingdom.

One of the hardest elements to measure is the impact of remote working on organisational culture and trust in public organisations. Organisational culture is the unwritten rules, habits and norms that surround a workplace. It is the invisible webs of incentives and unwritten cues that determine acceptable behaviour, dress, attitudes, and values. When well aligned, organisational culture can provide a common sense of

purpose, identity and belonging. Organisational culture is, in part, developed by being together and developing a sense of group identity which is very hard to recreate within an online environment.

Trust is a fundamental aspect of a positive workplace culture. In some cases, remote working may have helped improve trust by proving that presence is not a precondition for productivity. The association of presence with productivity is being replaced in most knowledge-based (and office-based) workplaces with a focus on outputs and outcomes. Modern management should care less about the number of hours in the office, than they do about the quality and quantity an employee is able to produce, regardless of where they do it from. Managers who questioned employees' abilities and motivations to genuinely work from home at the onset of the crisis have likely learned that there are almost no tasks that cannot be done remotely. They may have learnt to trust their employees to deliver regardless of whether they can see them at their desks. This shift in mindset is a good omen for the future of remote working in the public sector.

However, some experts predict a reduction of trust in the workplace. Interpersonal trust is easier built in person. This is because employees get much more information about their colleagues when they share spaces with them, and this information gives them a fuller picture that helps to understand their intentions, motivations and reliability, which are important contributors to trust. It's also easier to have misunderstandings in a virtual workplace that can result in reductions of trust, and take a long time to recover from.

- ✓ Office presence can help to generate organisational culture and trust in the workplace.
- ✓ Shifting focus from presence to results is a fundamental management goal in support of remote working.

Digitalisation of work

Leading teams in remote work during the stressful crisis, while adopting new ways of providing public services to citizens, required a whole new set of skills both from workers and from managers, in order to induce public sector transformation towards more digital settings, but also based on a collaborative approach.

-Fatima Fonseca, Secretary of State for Innovation and Administrative Modernisation, Portugal

Public servants have also learned to use and integrate new digital tools for work. As the workplace became virtual, public servants moved their work online and used digital tools to connect virtually and collaborate in new ways. There is a broad assumption that after the return to the office, these tools will continue to be used frequently by public servants, changing working patterns forever.

While at the start these were likely used to replace a particular function that had previously been conducted in person (e.g. regular team meetings), over time they also begin to shape working practices and open doors that hadn't existed in the past. For example, online tools may have been used first to recreate traditional in-person training, but over time trainers realise that the tools enable them to reach a far greater number of people and integrate different learning patterns than before. Recognising how these tools are reshaping working patterns can help to ensure that a return to the office happens in a way that supports this new way of working.

Additionally, many of these tools may have been introduced quickly with public servants learning and refining their skills to use them through trial and error. Over time, a wealth of tacit knowledge, tips and tricks have likely been built up across organisations. Bringing users together to share best practices around the use of these tools can help to integrate them into new working practices for the post-crisis era.

- ✓ Digital tools are increasingly part of working life and are reshaping working patterns.
- ✓ This blurs the organisational boundaries between human resources, information technology and physical property services which need to work together to find the right solutions.

2. Look forward to where the civil service should be in 5-10 years

There is a big opportunity for governments in this area. An opportunity to create new, more attractive workplaces, to bring in talent from across the country to drive transformation in the public sector. An opportunity to inject new diversity, inclusion and gender balance into public employment. And an opportunity to lay a foundation for new ways of trust-based working, managing, and delivering services to citizens.

- Elsa Pilichowski, Director of Public Governance, OECD

Before planning the return to the office, it is also important to look forward, far beyond the pandemic and the immediate operational challenges. The OECD's vision for the future of work in the public service is forward looking, flexible and fulfilling. Forward-looking to develop a workforce not just fit for today, but with the skills needed in the future. Flexible to respond to crisis and new challenges as they arise, and fulfilling to an increasingly diverse range of public servants.

The return to the office presents significant opportunities to advance all three of these goals. It is an opportunity to inject new flexibility and resilience into the public service operating model. The plans themselves can be forward looking by ensuring that governments take into account the larger strategic objectives of public service development in the medium to longer term. For example, this could be an opportunity to refit offices with new technology and/or to rethink office locations. Additionally, the right balance of remote and office working can help to provide fulfilling work experiences to a greater diversity of employees since it may enable different people to have their personal needs met in ways that matter to them. They may become a key aspect of attraction and retention strategies and could also expand the potential pool of applicants when combined with new working locations.

In these ways, the return to the office is more than an immediate operational challenge, but an opportunity to lay new foundations of the future of work in the public service.

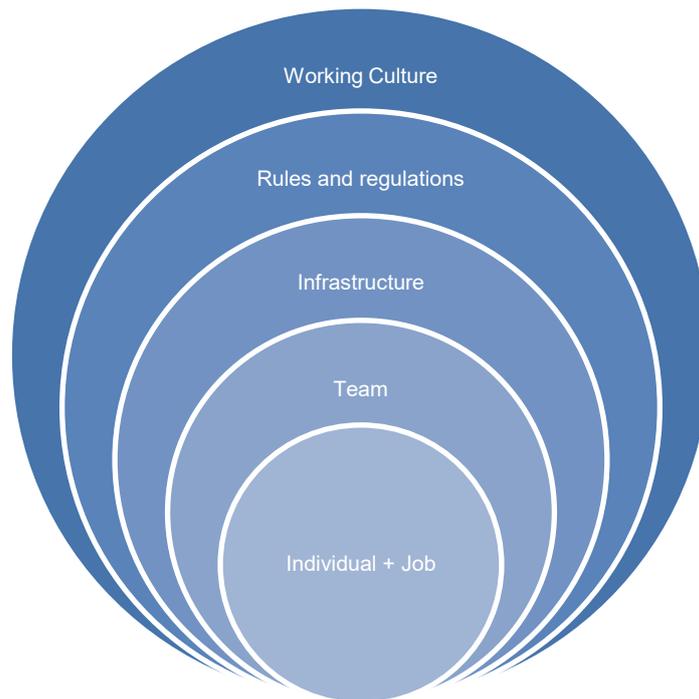
- ✓ Identify the future vision for work in the public service. If it doesn't exist yet, this could be the opportunity to develop it.
- ✓ Consider the potential impacts of decisions made today five years from now.

3. Design a new balance

We have a unique opportunity to accelerate important transformations because now we have a collective understanding of what is possible, what is needed, and what can go wrong... 86% of our managers agree that this is the right time to discuss new working models because things are fresh in our minds and we can't go back... 65% of our managers and workers consider that it is possible to continue teleworking most of the time.

-Fatima Fonseca, Secretary of State for Innovation and Administrative Modernisation, Portugal

Moving from strategy (what do we want to achieve?) to operations (how do we open the office?), requires a multi-layered approach: it starts with individuals doing a job within organisations structured by rules, physical and virtual infrastructure and working culture.



- a) **Start with individuals:** Remote working during the pandemic has been experienced very differently by different people, depending on a range of personal factors, such as their family and home situations, age, gender, access to technology, etc. As organisations return to the office, many staff members will likely be happy to return for some percentage of their working time, but for a variety of reasons – some may need the quiet space away from their families, while others will want to use the office for active exchange with colleagues.
- ✓ Define the objectives of a new remote-working policy from the perspective of individuals – e.g. to provide increased choice for work-life balance, to attract and retain high performers, to be a more inclusive employer.
 - ✓ Identify the various reasons employees will want to come into the office, or stay at home.
 - ✓ Develop different employee personas and the ways and reasons they may make use of remote working policies.
 - ✓ Identify how remote working fits into a broader future strategy of wellbeing and work-life balance.
 - ✓ Aim for maximum flexibility so that individual employees can work with their managers to find the right balance that meets their needs and the organisation's needs.
- b) **Recognise not all jobs are equal:** As with individuals, the jobs they do are also very different. It may be that individual work is best suited to home whereas tasks involving high levels of team exchange are best suited to the office. Managerial positions may be inherently more compatible with office presence. Other considerations may include access to tools, data or files that are only available at the office (e.g. due to licensing or security considerations). Depending on how the office is set up, colleagues may prefer to conduct zoom meetings from home, and team meetings at the office.
- ✓ Identify which tasks employees prefer to do from home.

- ✓ List the reasons certain tasks may need to be done on site. Identify which jobs/functions these reasons apply to.
 - ✓ Consider how a change in environment (e.g. office redesign or access to better digital tools) may change these assumptions
- c) **Don't forget the value of social interaction:** Many public servants work in tight-knit teams. Different teams will have different working cultures and may find it beneficial to be co-located at regular intervals (at least once per week?) for opportunities to meet in person, coordinate work, brainstorm ideas, and exchange socially. Ideal home/office patterns may also ebb and flow according to the project lifecycles. Additionally, social interaction across teams should also be encouraged, to build back trust and generate common sense of purpose. Timing office presence should be done in ways that also break down silos and generate impromptu exchange.
- ✓ Set expectations for team co-location at regular intervals for teams that want to work collaboratively.
 - ✓ Ensure flexibility in the schedule to make room for specific needs related to specific projects.
 - ✓ Try to ensure that teams have opportunities to interact with other teams, and generate moments of impromptu exchange.
- d) **Switch the default on Remote working rules and regulations.** Before the pandemic the default was usually office-based working, with rules indicating under which circumstances remote working would be allowed. The pandemic has proven that remote working can work for most of the tasks conducted by office-based public servants. So, the new post-pandemic default could assume that all jobs/situations are open to remote working, and then define the areas where limitations and exceptions can be imposed.
- ✓ Begin with the assumption that all jobs and employees could work remotely.
 - ✓ Agree on the factors that would require employees to be located in the office – e.g. security considerations, use of specific tools - and identify the job categories that are likely to be most impacted by these factors.
 - ✓ Agree on an ideal minimum amount of time all employees should be in the office (e.g. to build organisational culture).
 - ✓ Identify criteria under which management should be able to request additional office presence (e.g. when preparing for a specific deadline, for team training and workshops, in cases of performance problems etc).
 - ✓ Clearly articulate expected behaviour for employees and managers working remotely and in the office – e.g. as a charter or code of conduct.
- e) **Put the physical and virtual infrastructure in place:** An effective remote working policy will depend on the right infrastructure and harmonisation across people, information technology and property policies. IT tools have likely already been rolled out to manage large scale remote working during the pandemic. But for a new balance, they will also be needed to achieve a more seamless integration of office and remote working. Additionally, this new balance will change working patterns, hence opening opportunities to reorganise working space.
- ✓ In the short term, find ways to improve the use of existing space, e.g. to develop desk-sharing schemes among a group of employees, and equipping office rooms with video-conferencing technologies.

- ✓ In the medium term, consider redesigning office space to provide more opportunities for social collaboration.
 - ✓ In the longer-term, consider how a new working balance opens opportunities to reconsider office locations – e.g. moving towards working hubs and offices away from high priced capital centres, and closer to where people live.
- f) **Keep an eye on culture(s):** To change employee behaviour one must also consider the many unwritten rules and incentives that make up culture. Remote working will be perceived differently depending on the dominant national culture and the way people view, e.g. the role of work vis-a-vis the home and family, the role of authority and hierarchy, individuality and the collective. Additionally, different organisations have different management cultures. The role of managers in creating the culture necessary to support remote working cannot be underestimated. If managers' behaviour demonstrates preferential treatment to employees who are present, e.g. through assignment of work tasks and sharing of key information, then employees will likely follow suit.
- ✓ Set clear goals and objectives – clear messaging on expectations from the top of an organisation is an important way of setting and changing culture. An organisation that is serious about setting a new balance for remote working should explicitly say so, and set goals around this.
 - ✓ Communicate often up and down – ensuring that management is able to articulate its progress to achieving goals, is as important as ensuring it can hear from staff about the challenges they feel in achieving them.
 - ✓ Give managers the needed tools (and skills) – managing teams that are not always co-located may be a new challenge for many managers. Training and clear guidelines can help, as well as constant communication and feedback from peers.
 - ✓ Hold managers accountable – line managers who interact with their staff daily are more important than senior managers in creating lasting culture change. Make sure they are on board with the change, discuss progress regularly at management team meetings, give them safe spaces to share about challenges they face and to raise concerns.
 - ✓ Treat employees equally – if a real new balance is to be achieved, managers need to treat office and remote staff equally and equitably.
 - ✓ Cultures are experienced differently by different people, bringing into play the role of gender and also age cohorts, with younger employees having different expectations for remote working than their older counterparts.

4. Engage and co-design

As with all workplace policies, engagement and co-design help to strengthen development, build buy-in, catch blind-spots, and improve take-up. Many organisations will combine broad-based engagement, through employee surveys and open consultation, with deeper engagement through a smaller working groups of stakeholders to co-design the actual measures. These should likely include:

- ✓ Employees (and representatives): in many cases, public sector unions will be necessary partners throughout the planning and implementation of a new remote working policy, presenting opportunities to engage in constructive social dialog for a future vision of the public service workplace

- ✓ Line management: will play an essential role in the effectiveness of any new remote working policy and therefore needs to be brought on board and part of the discussion.
- ✓ Specific groups of workers: existing groups could be used for consultation. For example, networks of particular functions to ensure their unique jobs are accounted for. Networks for specific groups of employees – e.g. young professionals, diversity and equality groups, and/or regional groups - could be consulted as well, and provide members for the working group.

5. Pilot, Test, Learn and Adjust

We've encouraged agencies to look at the question of where decisions on the future of work need to be made, and to delegate those to the appropriate level of work unit... it's a leapfrog moment to empower organisations, managers and supervisors more than we have done historically.

-Dustin Brown Deputy Assistant Director for Management, Office of Management and Budget, United States

Iteration is a fundamental component of successful innovation and the policy announced should be tested, monitored, and adjusted continuously, based on monitoring and feedback at regular intervals. An effective performance monitoring approach will need to identify and track KPIs, but also other indicators of success and/or risk – e.g. productivity, employee well-being, and inclusion. This can come from administrative data, employee surveys, and organisational performance data. It can also be monitored through frequent qualitative feedback sessions with participants.

When setting up the staged implementation process, the following tensions and steps should be considered:

- ✓ Define success: a pilot is meant to test an approach to reach a goal, with clear and measurable KPIs. Defining these KPIs and setting a bar for success is necessary but challenging – particularly in the public sector where productivity is hard to measure. Even simple KPIs can be hard to interpret – e.g. does a low take-up rate mean that employees don't want to work remotely as much as they thought they did during the pandemic? Or does it mean that the management culture was unable to adjust effectively?
- ✓ Develop a central policy with room for local variation: from a piloting perspective, it would be ideal to enable a high level of variation across organisations – as this enables various experiments to occur simultaneously, with increased potential for learning and sharing across organisations. From an employee rights perspective, this could raise challenges on the unequal treatment of public servants.
- ✓ Manage investment risks. It will be tempting to start with elements that have little cost, and scale up progressively if organisations see take-up. However the risk here is that without the investment in the first place (e.g. of essential IT infrastructure and digital tools) there will be little take-up and the policy will be discontinued. This can be overcome by recognising that such investments will be necessary regardless – since digital tools are becoming increasingly standardised for working in office or remotely.
- ✓ Clarify a monitoring strategy, with regular updates on KPIs and reporting requirements. This should also include qualitative monitoring through employee groups at various hierarchical levels.
- ✓ Ensure that monitoring data creates short feedback loops that are discussed at regular intervals by management and acted upon quickly to improve the policy as the situation and context changes.

- ✓ Celebrate success.