



HOW-TO GUIDE

The hybrid workforce challenge for state and local agencies

Earlier this year, as state and local governments across the country sent employees home overnight, human resources departments scrambled to maintain workforce productivity in the new normal of mass remote work. A year and a half later, however, HR departments face a vastly different challenge. As some employees return to the office, how can HR help ensure community, productivity, and workplace engagement within a hybrid workforce?

Questions like those arose during the recent roundtable, “Building a World-Class Employee Experience for a Hybrid World of Work,” sponsored by Infor®. During the event, Moderator Alex Treadway, Associate Publisher for Route Fifty, spoke with federal HR leaders about the future of hybrid work and the challenges it poses for the federal workforce.

Here are three areas where state and local HR departments must focus in order to resolve issues and ensure productivity:

1. Address lingering hesitation over remote work

Before the coronavirus pandemic, a culture of skepticism toward remote working was prevalent within the federal government. According to a [Pew Research Poll](#), only 4% of state and local employees had the resources and permission necessary to telework.

Post-pandemic, however, state and local agencies [see the value in telework](#)—although not without lingering doubts. During the discussion, several HR professionals highlighted their hesitancy to continue remote work, with one of the primary concerns involving how to measure productivity and performance. “How do I ensure that you’re putting in a 40-hour work week and that you’re delivering on these projects that I have for you?” asked Tiffany Bose, Human Resources Manager for the City of Huntington Beach. Matthew Bragstad, Vice President and Head of People, Vision, and Strategy and Chief Storyteller at Infor, turned the conversation on its head, however, by challenging the notion of hours worked and its connection to productivity. And so far, the research backs Bragstad up. A [five-year research study](#) trialed by the Icelandic government looked into how shorter work weeks would impact employee output. The study revealed, as Bragstad noted, that hours worked do not necessarily equate to value delivered. But with this shift away from in-office monitoring and hours as the gold standard for performance, it has naturally left many leaders in state and local government wondering how to measure this new metric: value delivered. By introducing a more holistic approach to KPIs, however, Rosalyn Nealy, Human Resources Director for the City of Powder Springs, GA noted that state and local leaders can more easily estimate value delivered separate from closely monitored in-office hours.

2. Continue and normalize pandemic best practices

During the pandemic, as agencies had to adapt to new workflows and processes, several best practices emerged. But now, as state and local governments return to the office, the challenge will be implementing these workflows within a hybrid environment. Sally Vardy, Chief HR Officer for the Harris County Appraisal District, stated, “Now that we have the technological resources, we need to continue to leverage the best practices from the pandemic period. But in my opinion, because our culture is so old and it’s so hard coded into everyone’s DNA, we have so many people who are hanging on to the old legacy culture values, but the culture has to change. Now that we have the technological resources, we need to continue to leverage the best practices from the pandemic period.”

As state and local agencies look to implement these best practices, they also need to keep in mind that there likely shouldn’t be a “return to normal.”

“If we go back to doing things exactly the way we did them before COVID, we are really missing an opportunity,” said Paula Reid, Human Resources Director for the Commonwealth of Virginia’s Retirement System. Instead of returning to pre-pandemic operations, state and local leaders should see this as an opportunity to adopt new ways of working, such as using Zoom or Google Hangouts for agency-wide meetings. And as Reid has witnessed, normalizing pandemic best practices can ultimately help an agency better reach and communicate with its employees.

3. Prioritize the three Cs: Communication, communication, and communication

America has a loneliness problem, and the pandemic only served to amplify these feelings of isolation within the general population, with a recent Time Magazine article reporting that “[COVID-19 is Making America’s Loneliness Epidemic Even Worse](#).” Moreover, a feeling of community is imperative to workplace morale and productivity. Making efforts and investing in tools to improve communication while remote has been a beneficial tool to counteract these feelings of isolation and loneliness, according to HR professionals who attended the roundtable.

During the pandemic, communication was vital in helping government HR professionals boost workforce morale and feelings of connectivity among employees—and it will continue to be crucial going forward. “Communication is key. I think it’s been key throughout the entire pandemic...I think we have to make sure as we move forward, we have to continue to focus on communication,” Reid said. But it’s no secret that meaningful workplace communication can be difficult to achieve, and with new layers of workplace dynamics coming into play as agencies go from fully remote to hybrid, it adds another layer of difficulty. The Commonwealth of Virginia, however, found several ways to amplify communication efforts over the last year that aimed to meet employees where they were.

“We have conducted virtual town halls. Our director would always have agency-wide meetings and we have about 400 employees and you might have a hundred who would come, but since we’ve been working remotely, we’ve had about 300 people attend live, and then we record it and we have another 50 or so who watch it again,” stated Reid. The results? “I’ve had a number of employees tell me that they feel even more connected to our organization because of some of the things we’ve done during the pandemic,” Reid explained.

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