# Practical steps for creating a remote workforce strategy

People solutions

The COVID-19 pandemic has permanently changed the way we work. Even as vaccines begin to lessen the impact of the virus around the world, it's clear that there are new expectations for how businesses should operate. Flexible work arrangements are the new normal. Preparedness for future crises is now a top priority. Operational strategies need to evolve in ways that account for unprecedented levels of remote workers. While some industries may find it easy to adjust to these changes, others may struggle to survive in this new environment. But by embracing innovative technologies, ideas, and best practices, every business can find ways to succeed now and beyond the current crisis.

While certain industries or positions will never lend themselves to remote work or flexible schedules, a recent study by the University of Chicago revealed that 34% of U.S. jobs could plausibly be performed at home.[1] In fact, the share of the workforce that works from home has tripled over the past 15 years.[2] The traditional resistance to flexible work arrangements stems from concerns that work-from-home scenarios could be less conducive to productivity than office environments.
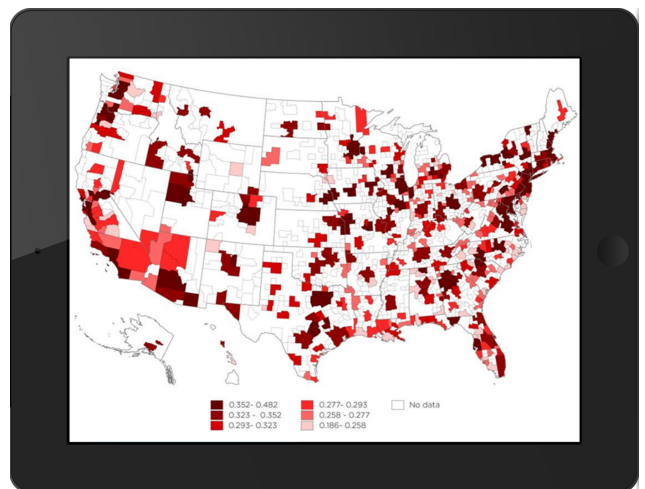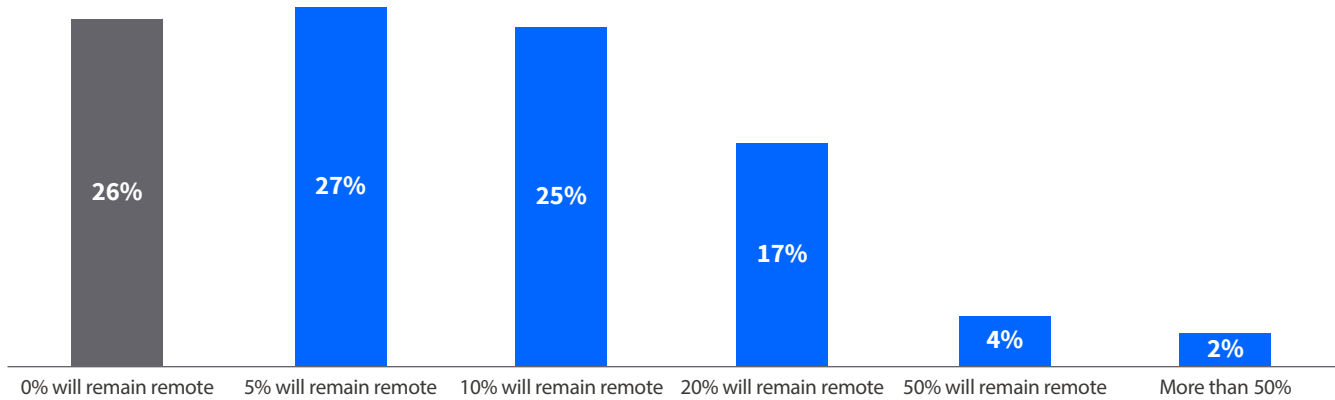

Geographical distribution of the share of jobs that can be done from home across metropolitan areas.[1]

Figure 1: 74% of companies plan to permanently shift to more remote work post COVID-19

What percentage of your workforce will remain permanently remote post-COVID who were not remote before COVID?

■ % of companies

0% will remain remote	5% will remain remote	10% will remain remote	20% will remain remote	50% will remain remote	More than 50%
26%	27%	25%	17%	4%	2%

Source: Gartner (April 2020)

However, a two-year Stanford University study showed that, when allowed to work from home, many employees saw a productivity boost equivalent to a full day of work. In addition, employee attrition decreased by 50%, and individuals who worked from home tended to take fewer sick days. There was even a financial benefit, as the company saved almost $2,000 per employee on rent through the reduction of office space.[3]

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed a broad range of workforces to the possibilities of remote work, and many expect that it will be difficult—if not impossible—to revert to traditional ways of working. Meanwhile, a recent study by Gartner showed that 74% of CFOs expect some of their employees to continue working remotely after the pandemic ends.[4]

In reality, the most serious issues with remote work only arise when organizations lack a well-established, thoughtfully developed remote workforce strategy. This guide provides tangible suggestions for how companies can respond to the current crisis conditions while laying the strategic foundations for a new, more remote work-focused future.

The remote work revolution

As organizations begin to consider timelines and logistics for returning to work, the workplace is likely to evolve in more ways than one. For jobs that truly require a physical presence, offices may need to be completely redesigned for the safety and health of the workforce. Closed-off cubicles may make a resurgence to allow for social distancing, while wider corridors and improved air filtration systems are more likely to become necessary investments. But many of the most impactful changes will come from logistical rearrangements that don't require physical renovations.

For many workplace leaders, the solution is to find new ways to schedule employees—perhaps by separating the workforce into "groups" that clock into work on alternating days. This reduces exposure while allowing every team member to come into the office on a regular basis.

Other businesses may determine it makes more sense to simply allow a contingent of the workforce to continue to work remotely. A wide variety of benefits have been realized by individuals and organizations in allowing a more flexible model of work.[5]

Figure 2: 5 Proven Benefits of Remote Work for Companies

	Productivity	Teleworkers are an average of 35-40% percent more productive than their office counterparts, and have measured an output increase of at least 4.4%
	Performance	With stronger autonomy via location independence, workers produce results with 40% fewer quality defects
	Engagement	Higher productivity and performance combine to create stronger engagement, or in other words, 41% lower absenteeism
	Retention	54% of employees say they would change jobs for one that offered them more flexibility, which results in an average of 12% turnover reduction after a remote work agreement offered
	Profitability	Organizations save an average of $11,000 per year per part-time telecommuter, or 21% higher profitability

Source: Forbes (February 2020)

Individuals who are new to the work-from-home experience say they benefit greatly from the elimination of commuting, the ability to better balance domestic tasks, and the uninterrupted focus they can maintain when working remotely. Employers, on the other hand, find that remote workers help to reduce commercial real estate costs and help relieve budgetary challenges.

Prior to the pandemic, almost 80% of the global workforce—from retail, to manufacturing, healthcare, and sales and service—was already operating in a more mobile "deskless" capacity.6 But even this dynamic workforce still needs access to tools, training, and resources that help them maintain productivity even if they are not tethered to a physical location. As schedules and standards change with new safety precautions, automation technologies like artificial intelligence, robotic process automation, and machine learning will help these workers to stay productive without sacrificing their safety.

While it is common to quickly look to technology for answers to modern challenges, it is important to also evaluate existing cultural norms and organizational practices that may inhibit creative problem-solving. When creating a sustainable remote workforce strategy, it's important to keep both cultural and technological shifts in mind—and selecting the correct one to prioritize for your business.

Step 1: Consider your culture

To adjust to the new normal of tomorrow, today's business leaders need to recognize the cultural nuances of their organization, and how they should be shaped to survive and thrive in a dynamic environment. In the context of the move to remote work, this starts with an open-minded perspective about work and the traditional workday. New social norms and advancements in technology have made the conventional Monday through Friday, 9-to-5 paradigm less of a monolith. Organizations with global reach have recognized the value in asynchronous work (i.e. schedules that do not occur at the same time).

Allowing individuals to work alternative hours from any location in the world provides access to a much larger, more diverse talent pool, and a wider assortment of ideas and perspectives.

A successful remote work culture requires a foundation of trust, accountability, and open communications. Trust is arguably the most critical component, and yet when the idea of remote work is introduced, managers question what their employees are up to. In a recent interview with Inc. magazine, Ryan Malone, founder of digital marketing agency SmartBug Media, says the practice is inconsistent: "You've invested all of this time in vetting them… Why would you now say I don't trust you, because I'm not staring at you?"[7]

Clear expectations around measures of success are typically enough to hold teams accountable for their actions and behaviors, and measurable, defined deliverables need to be clearly communicated and agreed upon from the start. From a communication perspective, the use of recurrent "check-ins" (brief, informative conversations versus formal, infrequent reviews) will ensure a regular dialogue is maintained despite the lack of physical proximity.

Step 2: Identify realistic roles

While many jobs in the U.S. can be done remotely, the majority will remain on-site for the foreseeable future. The challenge is determining which jobs belong in each category. Some will be obvious. A sanitation engineer cannot make trash disappear on a Zoom call, and the internet has provided an entertaining what happens when people attempt to cut their hair in the absence of readily-available stylists. However, some roles that seem unlikely remote work candidates become reasonable options after some creative thinking. While healthcare is arguably the most personal industry in the world, the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of alternative forms of care, such as telemedicine. In fact, the U.S. Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act (HR 748)[8] recently lifted restrictions on telemedicine services for seniors under Medicare in the U.S.—a move that may radically change the way we view doctors and nurses.

One exercise to undertake when considering whether a specific role could work as a remote position is to break down the role's component tasks and responsibilities. Frequently, there are a few elements of any job that would be difficult to do remotely, but if those responsibilities were stripped out or moved to a different role, the feasibility increases. In other cases, the business model itself should be evaluated instead of the roles.

A recent study by management consulting firm Alvarez & Marsal suggests that retail sales could ultimately fall as far as 70% in the U.K., with half of U.K. retailers facing a complete wipeout if the pandemic extends beyond the summer.[9] Those with a strong e-commerce platform will fare better than businesses that lack an online presence. Meanwhile, the role of the brick-and-mortar store itself may see an overhaul soon— with remote retail workforces potentially becoming the norm and physical storefronts taking on roles as showrooms or service centers.

Step 3: Pick the right people

According to Lighthouse Consulting Services, when the right person is selected for a given job, work production has the potential to increase up to 300%.[10] This principle can be applied to remote and physical roles as well, as the behaviors and qualifications required for successful remote work often differ from work conducted in an office setting. Infor's team of industrial and organizational psychologists has investigated multiple behaviors associated with successful job performance—compiling data from Infor customers across a variety of industries to create an aggregate profile for remote workers. Using this profile, we identified the key characteristics that accompany success in remote work.

Figure 3: 5 characteristics most strongly correlated with success of a remote worker

Discipline	Humility	Emotional consistency	Pace	Need for recognition
People who align well with this characteristic are comfortable leaving projects unfinished if priorities change, but may sometimes postpone beginning new projects. They prefer fewer distractions, but also do not lose focus when interruptions occur.	People who align well with this characteristic have a humble disposition, but may be too open about self-perceived flaws. They tend to be sincere and may underestimate themselves at times.	People who align well with this characteristic tend to maintain composure at work, but may express more excitement than others. They tend to express feelings in certain situations.	People who align well with this characteristic enjoy working with a sense of urgency, but can adjust this urgency to meet the needs of a situation.	People who align with this characteristic tend to be motivated by a personal feelings of accomplishment and are content with minimal praise. They maybe demotivated by overly frequent rewards and recognition.

Source: Infor study (2020)

Based on data from the Infor study, the five characteristics listed above are the most strongly correlated with the success of a remote worker. When working remotely, individuals need to remain task-focused with a true sense of personal strengths and weaknesses. Being forthcoming and comfortable expressing thoughts and emotions also appears to be important in this type of work environment. Successful remote workers seem to have little reliance on external praise and are motivated by a sense of urgency on work tasks. The data indicates that all these behaviors stand to impact work performance in several ways and are helpful to cultivate in each team member. Infor Talent Science® clients that have used similar profiles have seen compelling reductions in turnover due to their knowledge and understanding of the behavioral DNA of each individual in their organization. This information can be used to personalize experiences for employees regardless of role or location.

Step 4: Tap new technology

Once the first three steps are taken, it is important to pinpoint and evaluate new technologies that can help enable, empower, and engage remote workforces in a sustainable manner. Online video conferencing platforms are becoming critical infrastructure, while team collaboration software has become more commonplace than ever before. When it comes to employee training opportunities, this is arguably online learning's moment in the sun as school systems, higher education, and organizations in every industry recognize the potential of virtual tools for continuous learning and development. Meanwhile, cloud solutions have yielded a wealth of benefits, as organizations do not need teams to be physically on-site to maintain servers and systems.

"We are now supporting a large remote workforce and they are just as productive as they are in the office. Payroll is being done remotely and our users are very happy," said Jim Ollerton, director of IT at Infor customer Elsinore Valley Municipal Water District.

While most organizations have access to some of these tools, many have yet to invest in new digital workforce solutions that can make it easier for supervisors to manage and evaluate remote workers, which becomes even more important as communication between managers and employees takes on a new significance.

Even prior to the pandemic, performance management was not being conducted optimally. According to Gallup, only 19% of millennials say they receive routine feedback, and 17% say the feedback was meaningful.[11] The idea of evaluating an employee on a mobile device may have seemed laughable a few short years ago, but today it is a convenient and easier-to-digest way to provide the frequent and immediate feedback that help bolster remote workflows. It takes only a few seconds to use Infor's Rave application to recognize virtually anyone in the organization, while the feedback is automatically routed for later use in formal reviews, promotion, and compensation conversations. Annual surveys could also benefit from these transformations, as organizations can now send pulse surveys (think "question of the week") to respond to employee wants and needs in a smaller time frame. All of these tools should be seen as key components of any modern suite of Human Capital Management solutions.

The new normal

While the impact of the pandemic will eventually decline and there will be some return to the old normal, other aspects of our work, the workforce, and the workplace will never be the same again. But every crisis can also become a chance to create meaningful change if the right mindset is in place. By considering company culture, identifying realistic roles, picking the right people, and tapping new technologies, organizations can turn the coronavirus pandemic into a leverage point for positive change that can benefit workers everywhere.

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INF-2452800-en-US-0321-1