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A New Look at Work

This is a workforce issue like none we have ever put together before, with every aspect of work changing right before our eyes. Fifteen months into the pandemic, many of us are by now veterans of the virtual work environment. Prior to last March, you likely had a point of view on telecommuting for the government workforce: a wonderful idea or one that could never work. But that opinion has likely changed. If it hasn’t changed, it has probably at least evolved.

The transition to large-scale remote work for large swaths of the public and private sectors wouldn’t have been possible without technology. A colleague of mine would call that statement “a penetrating stench at the obvious.” And given our vast tech-enabled capabilities, most people have been pleasantly surprised by how productive their staff have been.

In our cover story, Workforce Revisited (p. 26), we cite a stat from Pew Research: 46 percent of workers who had never worked remotely pre-COVID say they’d like to continue to telecommute at least part of the time. That’s a lot of people with a stated preference for flexibility. Is government prepared to deliver?

Those who manage large teams know that there’s a degree of uncertainty that naturally flows from not being able to see people in the same physical space, working. Presence functions of popular messaging apps help, as do video calls and emails in which issues are hashed out and progress is proven. But differences between in-person and remote collaboration can be stark, and remote work requires a shift to a different kind of performance measurement.

Abby Stay, deputy secretary for Future Workforce Development, thinks this shift can lead to increased employee engagement.

“If you tell me the results you want and leave it to me to come up with the best way of achieving those results, I am going to feel more empowered. I am going to take greater initiative. It’s going to spur my creativity, and I’m likely to become a more engaged, productive and loyal worker,” she said.

The challenges of government recruitment are well documented, but if government expects to compete with the private sector for talent, it must be prepared to evolve traditional beliefs about how work should be done and measured.

In our feature on The Disappearing Town Hall (p. 16), we consider government’s evolving physical footprint. As any brick-and-mortar businessperson can attest, leasing or buying the physical space in which to conduct business is a significant expense. Then there are all the related costs of heating and cooling, electricity, equipment, et cetera.

As has been widely reported, a lot of big names in private industry are moving toward a virtual model, scaling back the size of their headquarters and re-engineering their work to require less face-to-face interaction. That idea has merit for government too, though the prospect is complex for organizations with a lot of resources tied to physical spaces. CEOs and facilities managers alike are reconsidering physical space needs, due to budget considerations but also to bolster government’s reputation as an employer of choice. As the world of work continues to evolve, this is a must.

Global Workplace Analytics’ President Kate Lister put a fine point on it in an interview with GT. “When most companies are offering this [flexible work options] and 95 percent of their people say they want it, if government agencies don’t offer it, they’re just going to be looking at the back of their employees’ heads as they walk out the door.”

June 2021
www.govtech.com

By Noelle Knell / Editor
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Spreading Best Practices & Spurring Innovation.
Money Matters

As Vermont moves to create a $53 million technology fund for long needed modernization projects, CIO John Quinn has argued that such a fund is both necessary and potentially sustainable. After testifying before lawmakers in March, Quinn was optimistic that details for the fund could be worked out before the beginning of the next legislative session, beginning January 2022. The fund would include resources for replacing Vermont’s DMV, ERP and unemployment insurance systems, among a total of 12 projects.

FACE TIME

When universities went virtual last year, administrators increased their use of anti-cheating programs, which monitor students via webcam with AI-based facial recognition. But this March, the University of Wisconsin-Madison disabled facial recognition features offered through Honorlock, one online exam proctoring service, after three students with darker skin tones said the program failed to recognize their facial features and paused the exam. The company’s CEO denied hearing any explicit reports of such events, but said developers are working to refine the AI’s features, which aim to flag suspicious behavior during testing.

Biz Beat

AT&T is opening its 5G+ service — faster than standard 5G but harder to make work over large areas — to public safety agencies in 38 cities on the FirstNet network. FirstNet subscribers in cities including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Miami will get access to the faster service with no extra charge. AT&T is also working to shore up the network’s encryption and upping its efforts to promote health and wellness among first responders.

WHO SAYS?

“There’s two types of data in the world. There’s the stuff that people want to steal, and there’s everything else.”

goverttech.com/quotejune2021

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States Push for Broadband as American Jobs Plan Gains Steam
The DOTGOV Act: Local Cybersecurity a National Imperative

Funding raised in a Series B investment round by Replica, a startup that uses “synthetic” data to improve traffic and other urban activity.

The percentage of all Internet traffic that came from “bad bots” in 2020, according to IT security company Imperva.

The number of states selected to participate in the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices 2021 Policy Academy, the theme of which is cybersecurity.
Building Equity
San Jose’s model for expanding connectivity is one to watch.

Kip Harkness, the deputy city manager for San Jose, Calif., owns the city’s IT and innovation portfolios. He came to the city from a private-sector tech background, yet now one of his most significant innovations deals with the most basic of issues: how to connect low-income constituents to the Internet. There’s an inherent irony in the poor connectivity that many low-income folks suffer right in the middle of America’s tech heartland; according to Harkness, “despite the fact that we’ve created a capital of Silicon Valley, the speeds that you would have on your phone getting off an airplane here might cause you to think you’d landed in the wrong country.”

In 2016, Harkness brought on FUSE Fellow Dolan Beckel to explore broadband and equitable access in San Jose. “At that point, nobody in the city had an idea how much broadband and digital inclusion meant, and we spent the next year or so developing a strategy,” he said. Despite initial challenges between the city and telecom companies over small cell placement, the city proposed a collaborative relationship that would work for both. As Harkness described it, AT&T and Verizon “signed on with us that between the two of them they would install 4,000 5G small cells. And so, for the last 18 months prior to the pandemic, we were actually scaled up and had that fully going, so that fortunately by the time we went into shelter-in-place, we had a fully digital system already built.”

He described another “very fortunate happenstance” during this time: the move to digital permitting. Most of the telecom permits were already paperless pre-pandemic, which meant that the move to remote work didn’t disrupt the process. The permitting led to a partnership that is the first of its kind at this large of a scale and ended up being perfectly timed as the city went into remote work and distance learning.

For Harkness, equity was always a part of his IT and infrastructure plans. “When the pandemic hit, there were no pieces of paper to be lost, we were able to permit at 70 [small cells] a week,” he explained. “At that point, we sat down in partnership mode and said, ‘We want to continue to accelerate connectivity, but as you build out the next round, we need more of that to happen in the neighborhoods of need rather than in other places.’” Verizon and AT&T agreed with this equity focus and shifted their small cell construction to focus on the neighborhoods that the city had identified as high need.

Harkness is particularly proud of creating a “virtuous cycle” that companies are happy to sign on to, even when the city went above and beyond the FCC parameters. Any money that comes in through the telecom permitting fees for small cell deployments that doesn’t directly support the city team working on the permissions is put into a Digital Inclusion Fund. This created a “closed loop,” so that every dollar that comes in from telecom partners — at roughly $750 per small cell per year — is either directly supporting city employees working on connectivity or being funneled back into the under-connected and low-income community.

The Digital Inclusion Fund is managed by select community-based organizations that conduct annual grant cycles. One of the ways that the fund helps get families and individuals connected is through libraries, which Harkness described as “the tip of the spear for us on digital inclusion.” Especially with the pandemic, the library system has been a main source of connectivity through an expanded hot spot borrowing program. AT&T provided $6.8 million of hot spot equipment for libraries and schools, and the city used coronavirus relief funds to pay for the connectivity service. Harkness said this had a significant ripple effect. “Our hot spots can connect up to 16 people on a device without degradation. What we found is, you connect the student, you connect up to three generations.”

Cities and telecom providers simply do not have the same goals. Private companies will prefer to prioritize those areas with more commercial opportunity, while cities want to ensure equitable availability. The San Jose model provides structure for a path forward with overlapping interests: Issue the permits efficiently and quickly, generate reasonable fees, and use a partnership with some gentle nudging to increase coverage. It’s a good lesson.

Betsy Gardner, a research assistant and writer for Data-Smart City Solutions, co-authored this column.

Stephen Goldsmith is a professor at the Harvard Kennedy School and director of the Innovation in State and Local Government and Data-Smart City Solutions. He served as a senior advisor to the Response City: Engaging Communities through Data-Smart Governance
In many ways, the past year has been government’s time to shine. Despite massive disruption, IT and business leaders have risen to the task of enabling remote work and delivering constituent services in new ways. At the same time, they’ve encountered daunting technology challenges as overburdened web portals crashed and slow page loads frustrated users seeking unemployment relief and other urgent services.

To address these challenges and prepare for emerging technologies that require secure, real-time data processing at massive scale, many government IT leaders are turning to edge computing, where the collection and processing of data occurs closer to the sources of that data to improve latency, availability and security. IDC predicts that enterprises will invest approximately $250 billion in edge computing by 2024. As state and local government organizations consider adoption or expansion of edge computing programs, it’s critical to understand which technologies help deliver a secure, highly available solution and how to best use edge computing to propel digital transformation efforts forward. With the right tools and strategy, state and local government IT leaders can maximize the quality and reliability of digital services, provide more personalized user experiences and improve cybersecurity.

Taking Advantage of the Edge Universe
Maximizing the potential of edge computing requires an intelligent platform that minimizes latency and optimizes computing at the edge. Two important determinants of latency are 1) the number of “hops” data has to make to reach its destination, and 2) the distance between hops.

An intelligent edge platform minimizes both factors by providing pervasive, highly distributed points of presence that enable proximity to devices and users. These locations store data and resources close to where they’re needed to provide the lowest latency and highest availability. In addition, an intelligent platform uses data coming from these and other sources to identify traffic issues and route around them.

Very few infrastructure providers have the technology, expertise and financial resources to build out this type of highly distributed, highly localized (within one mile of end users) infrastructure. The leading intelligent edge platform is built on a network with more than 4,000 different points of presence, whereas one of the world’s leading cloud platforms is built on 230 points of presence globally.

An intelligent edge platform also incorporates a range of services, including:
Security at the edge. The massive shift to remote work has highlighted the need for security and zero trust access control that can be deployed regardless of where users, devices, applications and data are located. As a result, secure access service edge (SASE) has become increasingly popular. Using edge computing and machine learning, SASE controls look at user behavior and other contextual signals to detect, predict and prevent attacks.

Development at the edge. Edge workers enable developers to easily create and massively proliferate data, logic and microservices (e.g., for geolocation or personalization) to edge locations. By pushing services closer to end users, these tools reduce latency without burdening infrastructure or traffic flow where the code originated.

Knowing When to Use Edge Computing (vs Cloud)
The key to using edge computing successfully is knowing when to use it. Cloud computing and edge computing serve very different — and complementary — purposes. Edge computing is best for use cases that require shorter latency, higher availability or better security than is available when data has to travel between a user (or endpoint device) and a data center. This includes scenarios where actions must be taken based on data...
that is generated at the edge or that changes quickly and loses its value if it can't be processed in real time. Cloud computing is optimized for scalability and availability. It's ideal for data that has a longer shelf life (i.e., hours or months) and must be aggregated, processed and analyzed to provide ongoing value.

**Bringing the Edge to Life: When Milliseconds Matter**

The following use cases exemplify the types of scenarios that are ideal for edge computing.

**Day-to-Day Government — Vaccine Scheduling**

Government organizations have rolled out web portals and call centers where the public can register for and schedule a COVID-19 vaccine appointment. With edge computing, a registrant can quickly find a vaccine location near them by entering a ZIP code or enabling location-tracking on their device. Because artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning occur right at the edge, appointment availability is continually updated, giving registrants an accurate, real-time view of appointment slots. Security at the edge, bolstered by deep learning and machine learning, identifies and removes malicious robots before they can access vaccine scheduling websites in order to hoard and then “scalp” vaccine appointments.

“One local government went from a 20-minute process to sign up for a vaccine to a two-minute process when they implemented an edge computing solution. And it wasn’t that they saved any steps for the user. It’s just that it took the pages that much less time to load as they went through a multi-page signup process.”

An Weil, VP of Marketing, Akamai

**Essential Services – Social Safety Net and Education**

As a large number of individuals and families attempt to access government websites to request unemployment assistance and other urgently needed services, slow page-loads, website crashes and error messages can turn relatively easy processes into exercises in frustration and wasted time. The same challenges confront families with children who are struggling to attend K-12 classes online. Edge computing addresses these challenges by moving computing resources closer to where they’re needed to enable streaming video and real-time processing at massive scale.

**Emergency Services — Firefighting**

By processing data where it's generated and taking advantage of localized, high-speed connectivity, edge computing enables firefighters and other first responders to use data from advanced technologies to respond more rapidly, effectively and safely. IoT sensors can detect smoke or heat in remote or high-risk areas and automatically alert dispatchers. Automated messaging systems can send real-time updates and evacuation alerts en masse to community members in the fire zone. Body worn cameras and health monitors can help command units track the location and status of each firefighter, while drone surveillance can help identify evacuation routes, access roads for heavy equipment, and people or structures that are in harm’s way.

**Rooted in the Future**

The call for better user experiences — as well as the expanded use of IoT devices, AI and other emerging technologies — has highlighted the value of edge computing. As state and local governments embrace digital transformation, edge computing becomes more firmly rooted in their strategies. The key to success is to use edge computing with discernment and extend its value by wrapping it around cloud and other centralized solutions.

This piece was developed and written by the Center for Digital Government Content Studio, with information and input from Akamai.

*Endnotes:


**IDEAL USE CASES FOR EDGE COMPUTING INCLUDE:**

- Instantaneous delivery of services
- Action based on real-time data processing at massive scale
- Location-specific content
- Interaction with IoT-connected devices
- Streaming content
- Security controls at the edge

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Four Questions

How has the pandemic impacted how Delaware state employees do their jobs?

We have a little more than 300 employees in the Department of Technology and Information that are actively engaged in core services across the state. There are some job functions that just can’t be performed remotely. Since the pandemic started, we have about 25 to 40 employees in on a given day, whether that’s on administrative tasks or our network operations center, our output management services, or our networking team, keeping everything that everybody’s connecting to going. In addition, our desktop support teams maintain the machines and devices that everyone is using. However, the majority of our workforce, the other 250 plus, have been working from home since the pandemic started, and about 80 percent of them already had the functionality to do that.

What’s the ideal scenario for the state’s workforce in the future?

I think it’s a combination of both [remote and on-premise]. There are a number of IT-related tasks that are independent and individualized. Many developers trade one screen for another when they go home and so they have really nice home work environments. But we are not going to be able to replicate that everywhere and so we need space for that to happen. I think we’ll also find ourselves creating hotel space, where we bring a few people in at a time to get through a new initiative, make sure that we’re bouncing things off of one another in a way that can only occur when we’re together, but then from there, you go back home and take care of the job.

What’s the status of Delaware’s long-running centralization project?

We’re in a bit of a holding pattern.

What does recent momentum behind broadband mean for plans in Delaware?

Gov. Carney has been a huge supporter of closing the broadband gap in Delaware. We have invested in fiber up and down our state to connect state services, and we’ve seen that fiber grow with co-ops and private partnerships that extend it across our state and put it in range of other services. Access to CARES Act money allowed us to pursue wired connections, but also MiFi devices to well over 25,000 students who otherwise would not have access. We partnered with the schools, which made sure that students had a device to connect.

We also leveraged some CARES Act money to put together a strategic plan. The next step is to map out Delaware and understand what services are available where, what partnerships we need to create and what federal government programs we may be able to leverage to do something that’s a little more permanent than wireless. We just have to figure out which pockets of money to take advantage of to close the gap.

We have more of a sponsorship role, evaluating the technologies that are available. We’re responsible for the contracts that actually bring the Internet in for state services. So we’re leveraging our relationships and our insight around the technology to develop a plan and figure out how to leverage the funds and ultimately gain the governor’s support again in applying more dollars to finish this out.

— Noelle Knell, Editor
State and local governments typically have trained their employees in person, gathering staff in large conference room settings or offsite locations. But the nation’s response to COVID-19 caused large parts of public life to go virtual — including government workplaces.

The shift to remote work among state and local governments not only changes how public employees do their jobs, but also how they develop their skills. And these changes aren’t temporary. Nearly 75 percent of state and local governments expect the future of work to be a hybrid of in-office and remote employment, according to new research conducted by the Center for Digital Government (CDG) for Google Cloud.

This makes effective virtual training critical to the long-term success of state and local government agencies. The CDG/Google Cloud research — which surveyed 125 state and local government officials in November 2020 on their COVID-19 response and recovery efforts — found that respondents ranked employee training among their top workforce challenges during the pandemic. Agencies must develop virtual training strategies that strengthen engagement, foster a sense of connectedness, and ensure employees develop the skills they need to be successful in their roles and better serve the public.

### The Benefits of Virtual Training

Beyond enabling state and local agencies to meet COVID-related social distancing requirements, virtual training offers multiple advantages over traditional in-person training.

First, it’s more cost effective and scalable. In-person training must be conducted in a physical location with a fixed capacity at a set time. Research shows organizations can save between $9,550 and $15,870 per session by switching from traditional classroom training to virtual training.1 At the same time, employees may retain more of what they learn and spend 40 to 60 percent less time learning the same material.2

Virtual training also eliminates geographic, space and time constraints because employees can participate from anywhere. This approach offers employees more flexibility, depending on how training is structured. They can engage with content on smartphones, desktops or tablets, which can be beneficial for employees who are juggling remote schooling with remote work and sharing devices within their household.

On-demand, recorded trainings provide added convenience and the opportunity for self-paced learning.
In addition, virtual training helps agencies maintain workplace culture and foster inclusivity as they operate in new ways. With most government employees working in remote or hybrid environments over the past year, there’s minimal opportunity for in-person team meetings, casual conversations, brown bag lunches or social outings that help build a sense of camaraderie. Virtual training can’t entirely replace these experiences, but it does help reinforce bonds among management and staff because they can see and communicate with each other online. This also can keep employees productively connected to their agencies’ mission and reaffirm why the work they do to serve the public is so important.

Best Practices for Virtual Training

In a socially distanced world, virtual training is an indispensable tool that empowers employees to execute critical tasks from anywhere and ensure the work of government doesn’t come to a halt. As state and local agencies develop virtual training strategies, they should keep the following best practices in mind:

**Have a plan:** Though agencies can repurpose content from prior training sessions, it’s important to gather insights and feedback from employees and key stakeholders before finalizing the content. Ask what worked well and what didn’t in previous trainings, such as separating participants into breakout rooms or holding a Q&A session at the end of the training rather than throughout.

From there, you can create learning objectives and measurable training goals, such as having participants demonstrate proficiency in a specific workplace process or technical tool.

**Tap into internal and external expert resources:** Identify internal subject matter experts or external speakers who can deliver educational content in engaging ways. Agencies also can work with other government organizations to assemble best practices for virtual training. The specifics can vary by state, but there may be overlap in certification, continuing education and other training requirements. Governments can harness their collective wisdom to improve educational content or collaborate on training sessions.

Government agencies already use virtual training in multiple ways. Jeff Brown, a Google Workspace expert for Google Cloud Public Sector, says a growing number of state agencies use virtual training platforms like Google Classroom and Google Meet for recurring certifications in public safety, corrections and emergency management.

“They used to use large conference room settings to go through the written testing to certify corrections or public safety officers to use a taser — not the physical click-the-button and practical use, but the written portion of the training that goes over where you need to target and other policies and procedures,” he says. “We’re also seeing agencies use this to train smokejumpers. The training, again, isn’t focused on physically using the equipment, but a written certification test that they need to pass.”

Some corrections departments also use virtual training for GED and skills testing in correctional facilities, giving offenders access to learning opportunities that can help them gain employment when they’re released and potentially reduce recidivism.

The state of Iowa uses Google Classroom and a host of Google Workspace applications to meet evolving training requirements. For example, the state uses these tools to support a train-the-trainer model, teaching employee-trainers and department leaders how to create virtual training sessions for remote employees.

These platforms are being leveraged to meet other needs, too, such as supporting Iowa’s virtual visitation program for prison inmates. Because of the pandemic, in-person visits were suspended at Iowa correctional facilities, so the state uses the Google Meet video conferencing solution to provide secure, compliant in-person visits between inmates and their families.

The virtual visitation program, which was launched in March 2020, completed more than 98,000 video visits in its first year of operation and has received overwhelmingly positive user reviews. From design to deployment, the program was created in three weeks. It uses 110 Chrome Books deployed across nine Iowa Department of Corrections facilities to provide virtual visits that help the department keep inmates connected to their families at a time when maintaining human connection is increasingly difficult.
Engage, then educate: Use polls and surveys to hold the attention of virtual training participants. "Everybody running a virtual meeting today has had to figure out ways to get the audience engaged, use the right material, make it interactive and potentially fun," says Jeff Brown, a Google Workspace expert for Google Cloud Public Sector.

It also helps to keep sessions short. He says courses should be no longer than an hour, with 45 minutes of discussion and 15 minutes of audience questions. If this isn’t possible, agencies should consider breaking content into multiple sessions to combat online fatigue.

Use analytics to your advantage: Leverage analytics to gain more insight into how employees engage with training content and identify opportunities for improvement. Virtual training platforms can gather engagement data in real time and let agencies assess which interactive elements or content resonate with employees.

Measure and refine: Agencies also can use these metrics to assess whether they’ve achieved their learning objectives and training goals. Gathering feedback from participants, especially through post-event surveys, helps agencies improve current and future trainings.

Creating Your Virtual Training Infrastructure

Before state and local agencies can implement virtual training, they must build their virtual training infrastructure and carefully tailor their content and online programs to maximize employee engagement and learning retention. Agencies should start with a cloud-based platform and companion solutions that give employees access to content across devices and on-demand, and support different learning approaches, including self-taught, in-person, virtual or hybrid learning. The platform should easily integrate with other email, video conferencing, online presentation and calendar applications, creating an integrated environment that lets employees access all training materials and tools in one place.

The platform should support and simplify the training experience for employees and instructors. It should offer a streamlined process for employees to see all learning opportunities and easily register for sessions. Instructors must have access to reporting dashboards and analytics to view activity for each user, manage registrations, and track attendance and participation levels during sessions. Engagement features such as pre- and post-event surveys, breakout rooms, question-and-answer tools, in-session polls and chat capabilities help keep employees immersed in training content throughout each session.

Of course, virtual training for government employees also must be secure. Agencies need remote VPNs to ensure only employees or other authorized users can access their training content and networks. This is especially important if the content contains sensitive material. Employees’ home WiFi networks typically aren’t as secure as office-based networks, so taking this step is critical to safeguard privacy and strengthen endpoint security.

Finally, as they create their virtual training infrastructure, agencies need to address digital equity and accessibility. For example, agencies should provide a telephone-based

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Agencies must develop virtual training strategies that strengthen engagement, foster a sense of connectedness, and ensure employees develop the skills they need to be successful in their roles and better serve the public.

Training option for employees who have trouble accessing online content. (Instructors can provide training material to participants beforehand via email.) This is particularly important for employees in rural areas with limited broadband or WiFi access. Virtual training platforms also should be accessible by design — with features such as a Braille display, screen reader, caption track and voice capabilities — to support employees with physical and sensory disabilities or specific learning disabilities.

Improving Skills and Performance
As agencies continue to embrace remote and hybrid work, virtual training offers the flexibility and cost efficiency they need to engage employees and help them develop key skills.

Agencies must marry technology and content to create effective virtual training programs. Adopting a cloud-based, collaborative learning platform as the foundation for virtual training infrastructure lets employees and instructors benefit from an integrated workspace that provides a one-stop destination for all their training needs. With these tools, agencies can foster stronger connections across their workforces and help employees build skills that empower state and local governments to deliver more effective services and better customer experiences.

For more information on Google Cloud solutions for Workplace Productivity please visit: https://workspace.google.com/industries/government/

Endnotes:
1 State of Online Training, Training Industry Inc. 2016.

This piece was written and produced by the Government Technology Content Studio, with information and input from Google Cloud.
April 19, 2021, marked a banner day for space exploration: NASA’s Ingenuity Mars Helicopter became the first aircraft to take flight on another planet. Designed by the Jet Propulsion Laboratory and carried to the red planet in the Mars 2020 Perseverance spacecraft, Ingenuity weighs just four pounds and contains no science instruments. The craft’s purpose was to determine whether further aerial exploration of Mars would be possible. Due to its distance from Earth — hundreds of millions of miles — ingenuity could not be piloted via human control and instead flew autonomously, climbing to 10 feet off the ground and hovering for 30 seconds before making a controlled landing.

“As an homage to the two innovative bicycle makers from Dayton, this first of many airfields on other worlds will now be known as Wright Brothers Field,” a NASA representative announced of the area on Mars where the copter took flight, “in recognition of the ingenuity and innovation that continue to propel exploration.”
THE DISAPPEARING TOWN HALL

BY DAVID RATHS

KITCHEN TABLE, SPARE BEDROOM OR A GOVERNMENT BUILDING. WHERE WILL THE PUBLIC SECTOR DO ITS WORK IN THE FUTURE?
Many state and local CIOs are coming to the realization that the sudden shift to remote work brought on by the pandemic in March 2020 could become a permanent aspect of 21st-century life, with wide-ranging implications.

When she sent her 120 full-time employees home in March 2020, Annette Dunn, CIO for the state of Iowa, had a feeling of déjà vu. Just the year before, her entire IT team was forced to work remotely when their Des Moines office building was flooded. In January 2021, the Office of the CIO took over the lease of another state agency for two floors in a privately owned commercial office building that Dunn said was an upgrade over the state-owned building that had been flooded.

“We had just moved into this new office space in January and then we had to go remote again,” she says. One positive aspect was that her team already had experience working remotely, and as of April 2021, 95 percent of those employees were still working from home. “When I go into the office, it’s almost not worth it, because there are maybe one or two people in a two-floor radius,” Dunn said. “It’s very sparse, so I just make sure that I connect with everybody remotely.”

Like most other CIOs, Dunn is now evaluating a number of options for her team and the office space they lease. If the move to telework does continue indefinitely, state and local governments are going to look for savings in office space consolidation.

“It’s a very nice, new facility,” Dunn said, “and I’m very sad to say that I don’t think we’re going to be able to fill it, and we will have to rethink that.”

Also like most other CIOs, Dunn admits she has been pleasantly surprised by how well the current setup seems to be going. “I wouldn’t have a leg to stand on if I said remote working doesn’t work, because it has worked,” she said. “That being said, we’ve always had the ability for staff to go into the office, as long as they meet COVID protocols around hand sanitizing, wearing a mask and social distancing.”

In surveying employees, Dunn found that about half are very interested in wearing a mask and social distancing. “COVID protocols around hand sanitizing, don’t think we’re going to fill up some of their leased space. While considering how much space to keep in planning for future growth, her office would look into whether another state agency is looking for space to sublease. “These are the conversations we’re starting to have,” Dunn said.

Kate Lister, president of Carlsbad, Calif.-based consulting firm Global Workplace Analytics, said that, traditionally, state and local government has been behind on the telework curve. “The resistance in government and elsewhere has been the middle management attitude that you have to be seen and have butts in seats. … It’s just that managers don’t trust their employees, and government, more than a lot of places, has that command-and-control nature,” she said.

But the widespread adoption of remote work starting last year is changing minds. “If we do that, I can’t justify having this nice, beautiful office space,” she says. If they adopt the “hotelting” concept, in which employees use a booking system to reserve generic desk space on certain days, they might have to give up some of their leased space. While considering how much space to keep in planning for future growth, her office would look into whether another state agency is looking for space to sublease. “These are the conversations we’re starting to have,” Dunn said.

Kate Lister, president of Carlsbad, Calif.-based consulting firm Global Workplace Analytics, said that, traditionally, state and local government has been behind on the telework curve. “The resistance in government and elsewhere has been the middle management attitude that you have to be seen and have butts in seats. … It’s just that managers don’t trust their employees, and government, more than a lot of places, has that command-and-control nature,” she said.

But the widespread adoption of remote work starting last year is changing minds. “Forced into it, they find that it’s working very well, and productivity and employee engagement are up,” Lister added.

Does remote work save money?

The Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 required federal agencies to quantify some of the results from their remote working initiatives each year. The Social Security Administration reported $900 million in real-estate savings in 2018 and 2019, and the General Services Administration reported a 40 percent reduction in space and millions in real-estate and administrative savings.

Organizations often begin remote work efforts because of the cost savings, Lister added, but end up identifying other positives. “Once they’re in it, they find out that the benefits are far more around human growth. But to get the C-suite’s attention and to get the chief financial officer to sign off, it often takes making a solid business case.”

CIOs who are thinking about reversing remote work policies should perhaps think twice, Lister added. She cited a survey of U.S. Department of Education employees after a telework policy was reversed in 2018. Eighty-seven percent of respondents said the telework rollback had hurt morale, while only 2 percent felt it had a positive effect. In addition, 75 percent did not feel being back in the office had improved collaboration, and 86 percent said they knew someone who...
If you build it, will they come?

City leaders in Portland, Ore., are trying to figure out how the shift to remote work will impact their shiny new workspaces. After nearly two-and-a-half years and about $200 million of renovation, the Portland Building held a grand reopening celebration on March 19, 2021.

For the previous year, the 14 floors of office space for approximately 1,700 employees have been quiet.

“We’ve witnessed the effectiveness of teleworking, and many bureaus have expressed interest in right-sizing their physical footprint and re-examining who — and what work — can be remote,” said city Chief Administrative Officer Tom Rinehart in a recent budget presentation. “This year, we will begin charting a path forward, including impacts on the city’s costs, operations and culture.”

Some findings of the city’s research include:

• Telework has worked much better than the city previously thought it could.
• Many employees are likely to have some sort of hybrid schedule that includes a combination of telework and in-person office work.
• The collaboration and support of workplace culture and connection is missing with full-time telework.
• The city needs better ways to support videoconferencing when in the office, with the assumption that some employees may be teleworking and need to be in meetings with those in the office.
• If employees do not have their own assigned workspaces, the city will have several decisions to make, including whether it will turn to shared, reservable hoteling and/or drop-in hoteling spaces, and whether spaces would be broken down by city bureau or available to all city employees.

The city must also carefully weigh space needs to minimize the risk involved in making projections about a brand-new office scenario.

“We’ve witnessed the effectiveness of teleworking, and many bureaus have expressed interest in right-sizing their physical footprint and re-examining who — and what work — can be remote.”
had left or was considering leaving the agency because of the telework rollback.

Flexibility, redefined

Executives in King County, Wash., are currently devising their “Future of Work” plans. King County offices are closed to the public and employees through the July 4th holiday. “We are looking at what it means to reopen, and what the transition period will be like, because we’re not going to open up and all of a sudden be back to normal,” said CIO Tanya Hannah. “It’s not going to happen that way.”

Working on the IT department’s future, Hannah is currently planning for the 460 employees to stay remote longer term, building in some flexibility as offices reopen. “We’re going to position the teams so they can pick the frequency they wish to come into the office — once a week, biweekly, but a minimum of once a month.”

There are several reasons she’s chosen that particular approach. Some area schools are going to be in hybrid mode in the fall, and she has to worry about attracting and retaining IT talent against that backdrop. “One of the things I’m very concerned about is women leaving the workforce,” Hannah said, noting that it may be necessary to move beyond traditionally flexible options like four 10-hour days to things like job-sharing.

“If the private-sector market is letting people work from home three days a week and are having a lot more flexibility in their schedules, then in the public sector, we have to match that.”

“The Seattle market is competitive, so we need some value propositions. I also want to ensure we have a good organizational culture, because we’re losing that connection the more we stay apart.”

Hannah’s department will move to a hoteling concept for desk space. That decision means that the IT department will be in a much smaller footprint than they were before, likely losing about 10,000 square feet in office space. Beyond IT, King County has cut back on commercially leased space more broadly. “All of this has a major impact on how we’re going to set up,” Hannah said. “I’ve actually given up my office space to accommodate the closure of a building.”

A new lease on space

CIOs are working with facilities and real-estate executives to understand the long-term impact of the pandemic on their physical space needs. “We are definitely encouraging and working with departments to identify positions that can telework full and part time post-pandemic, which will lead not only to space savings, but also to cost and energy savings as well,” said Jason Kenney, deputy director of the Real Estate Services Division for the state of California. The state recently built three new state office buildings, with more in early construction, but Kenney points out that even before the pandemic those buildings were designed for flexibility.

“Back in 2016, when we really started ramping up on the building that’s been happening in Sacramento, we recognized that we’re building a building that’s going to last 150 years,” Kenney said. “We wanted to make sure that the space planning was telework-enabled. The way we handled the IT infrastructure in the building included a push toward worker mobility within the buildings themselves. The way we emphasize collaboration drove the ability to work anywhere in the building. The way we equipped conference rooms with every room having a video monitor or projector was intended to be a bridge between the work of today and the telework of tomorrow.”

The state is focusing on consolidating agencies into the new buildings, and while

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some departments may grow, there are definitely those that are not renewing the leases they currently have, Kenney said. He gave this example of the impact: One new building, pre-COVID, was slated for 3,250 employees. But because the California Natural Resources Agency and its departments have embraced telework, they are now projecting the building could accommodate 4,400 workers. “All of that, ultimately, is driven by telework. And we didn’t have to do anything. It was largely just rearranging how people fit into the building.”

Wait-and-see mode in San Diego

The 134-person enterprise IT team of the city of San Diego has been working from home for a year, and CIO Jonathan Behnke doesn’t yet have any specific return-to-work plan in place. “We still have many staff members who have to go through the vaccination process,” he said in mid-March, “so at this point, we’re still taking a wait-and-see approach.”

Behnke said, however, that it’s likely the team will adopt some sort of hoteling model. “We already have some office space constraints,” he added, “and the remote work model has proven itself in the past year, so we’ve got all the right tools in place to explore it further.”

The city has a large real-estate footprint, with somewhere around 400 locations, he said. “As we look at the big picture, there are common spaces in our downtown campus that might be leveraged differently.”

The decision about remote work longer term also will require alignment across the city’s executive team, and leadership in key departments like human resources and real-estate assets. “We want to ensure that we provide a high level of public service that exceeds or meets what we were providing before the pandemic, and we want to make sure we’re providing a safe and effective environment for our employees and the residents and businesses that we serve.”

The city’s Performance and Analytics Department conducted an employee sentiment survey and continues to do periodic updates to help department heads evaluate opportunities and areas of concern. “They surveyed city departments about remote work tools and the technology that they need to be effective,” Behnke said. “We’ve been using that feedback to shape the services that we’ve provided the employees who are working remotely.”

Expanding the workforce

Some CIOs see the move to remote work as an opportunity to open up their recruitment strategies. “If we go 100 percent remote work with some staff,” asked Dunn, although she added that poor broadband coverage could be an issue in many areas.

Whether remote work opens up the possibility of hiring people who don’t live nearby is “the million-dollar question that public and private sectors are grappling with,” King County’s Hannah said. The county’s human resources policy stiples that you have to live close enough to come into the office. “Someone living in rural Washington may be an option,” she said.

San Diego’s Behnke said there are workers in certain IT specialties who are difficult to attract and retain. “If the private-sector market is letting people work from home three days a week and are having a lot more flexibility in their schedules, then in the public sector, we have to match that,” he added, “so we’re going to have to watch the larger market to see how trends develop.”

Lister agrees that as they compete with the private sector for talent, CIOs are going to have to offer flexible work options. “When most companies are offering this and 95 percent of their people say they want it, if government agencies don’t offer it, they’re just going to be looking at the back of their employees’ heads as they walk out the door.”
Trust in government is dependent on how well agencies provide an effective, easy and emotionally resonate experience in every transaction they conduct. This issue brief explores the need for trust in government and provides some practical advice on how agencies can transform experiences to build trust with all the people they serve.

BRIDGING THE TRUST GAP
When it comes to government agencies and their constituents and employees, trust is an unspoken agreement of integrity that depends on both parties. Without trust, the involved parties can’t accomplish much, so government depends on the trust of those it serves.

Despite this, trust in government often remains lower than desired. According to research from Pew and others, public trust in government has been at historic lows in recent decades.

Today more than ever, rebuilding trust is vital as individuals and communities work to recover from the pandemic, accept election results or gain confidence in their government’s future strategy amid growing inequities.

Agencies at all levels of government need to build or improve their constituents’ and employees’ trust by implementing certain practices and deploying the right tools to enhance experiences. Following are some best practices.

UNDERSTAND EXPERIENCE
To enhance the experiences of citizens and employees and build trust, agencies first need to listen to and understand what people are experiencing. They need to operationalize empathy.

What is it really like trying to access government services and benefits? How easy or difficult is it to access agency websites or reach someone on the phone? Are there opportunities for training and career advancement? If agencies don’t grasp the pain points people are experiencing, how can they hope to eliminate them?

Agency executives need to understand the human experience of their constituents and employees across multiple channels and transactions.

FOCUS ON PEOPLE
Agency leaders must build trust among their own employees, because this can directly impact how they provide service to constituents.

They need to tap into frontline talent, and keep in mind that employees who deal with citizens directly are the face of the agency for each of those transactions. Make sure those and other employees have the training and tools they need to perform at a high level, and that they are satisfied in their work.
Other important “people” practices are to provide channels for employees to communicate internally, listen to their concerns so as to gain a better understanding of what’s working and what’s not, and then make necessary adjustments.

DEPLOY THE RIGHT TOOLS
Technology is a key component in providing better experiences for citizens and workers, and agencies need to leverage these resources.

Having real-time technical capabilities is vital to understand what is happening in the here and now with experiences. Tools that gather data in a timely manner enable agencies to react more quickly and fix any problems that might arise.

Data gathering, analytics and reporting tools should be able to answer experience-based questions, such as whether particular processes were easy, effective or emotionally resonant with citizens.

By gathering data focused on the human experience, including users’ tone of voice, expressions, feedback and other factors, agencies can gain the insights they need to improve experiences.

Having real-time capabilities can allow agencies to shift from being reactive to proactive in delivering positive experiences. It’s always better to make changes before serious problems present themselves. Because of this, it’s important to use data to prioritize constituents’ most urgent issues.

BUILD A CULTURE OF TRUST
Creating a culture of trust within an agency is vital, and it needs to come from the top of the organization and permeate everything the organization does. Leaders should make the building of trust through better experiences a high priority for everyone in the agency.

One way to help build such a culture is by highlighting the positive feedback from the people they serve and rewarding employees for going above and beyond to deliver excellent experiences. This doesn’t need to be elaborate; a simple acknowledgment or recognition can go a long way toward motivating employees.

Agencies should conduct regular reviews of their policies, processes, systems and applications, which can all impact experiences for employees and citizens. Enhancing policies and processes is especially important, because they dictate how an agency interacts with individuals. Technology tools will not be as effective if the processes they support are not designed with user experience in mind.

To that end, agency leaders need to remember they can’t bridge the trust gap by throwing more applications at the public. They need to create a collaborative solution, a partnership that features service, support and technology.

WHEN EXPERIENCE MATTERS
For government agencies, building trust among citizens and employees can mean the difference between success and failure in delivering on their mission. A low level of trust in government can lead to lower rates of compliance with rules and regulations, cause citizens to become more risk-averse and hinder agencies from supporting people when they need help most.

Some agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), have seen dramatic improvements in trust by creating better experiences across transactions and services. In 2015, the VA launched a program to improve experiences for the Veterans, families, caregivers, survivors and employees the agency serves.

The aim was to transform the culture, rooted in the core values of integrity, commitment, advocacy, respect and excellence. The effort included creating the federal government’s first customer service office, known as the Veterans Experience Office (VEX).

Among the major highlights of the initiative were listening to the voice of the Veteran across channels in real time, mapping the customer journey and creating helpful resources for key touchpoints, improving telehealth and patient experience, liying employee experience and customer experience together, and cementing the importance of customer experiences within the VA.

The initial efforts helped drive the VA’s trust score among veterans to 80 percent, up from 55 percent previously. Since then, the agency has achieved even more gains and trust in the VA is at an all-time high of 90 percent in VA healthcare.

Other agencies at all levels of government can follow in the VA’s footsteps to improve experience — and increase trust.

This paper was written and produced by the Center for Digital Government Content Studio, with information and input from Medallia.

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Remote work has changed hiring, onboarding and talent management. Here’s how government is adapting. By Adam Stone

Like other employees across California state government, the majority of IT workers shifted to remote work during the pandemic. As government reshapes itself in the wake of COVID-19, many are likely to stay remote, said Abby Snay, deputy secretary for Future of Work at the California Labor and Workforce Development Agency.

The likely shift to work-from-home modalities among government technology teams mirrors private-sector trends. More than half of those who can work at home — 54 percent — say they’d prefer to keep doing so, according to the Pew Research Center. Forty-six percent of those who had never worked from home pre-pandemic say they’d like to continue remote work some or all of the time going forward.

“The bulk of our people will still work from home primarily” once COVID-19 recedes, said Tennessee Deputy Chief Information Officer J.P. McInnes. “We are going to model whatever the agencies decide to do. If the Department of Health, for example, says they are coming back to work three days a week, and two days a week you can work from home, then that’s exactly what the IT team that supports that department will do.”

Across state and local government, the entrenchment of a remote IT workforce will bring new opportunities, and also novel challenges. Government HR and IT experts alike are busily considering the management issues and cultural considerations that may arise, as well as potential new opportunities for recruiting in the highly competitive IT space.
Managing remote workers

A long-term shift to a mostly remote IT workforce will bring with it a range of management challenges.

“It puts a strain on managers and supervisors, many of whom are not used to managing employees who work remotely,” said Robert J. Lavigna, director of the Institute for Public Sector Employee Engagement, part of CPS HR Consulting. “In the past they may have managed time, attendance and activities, not results or outcomes. There’s going to have to be a transition.”

Some in government already are anticipating just such a shift. When IT teams go remote, “the manager really has to focus on the effectiveness of employees,” said Austin, Texas, Chief Information Officer Chris Stewart. “You’re obviously not looking at what time they’re coming in the door, what time they’re leaving, as a measure of effectiveness,” he said. “We need to be looking at work product: Are we meeting customer demand, making our customers happy? Are we getting technologies deployed? Are we doing what we need to do in a timely manner?”

If IT leaders can shift to measuring success based on outcomes, some say, that will be a net win for government technology organizations.

“This hopefully leads to greater autonomy and initiative,” Snay said. “If you tell me the results you want and leave it to me to come up with the best way of achieving those results, I am going to feel more empowered. I am going to take greater initiative. It’s going to spur my creativity, and I’m likely to become a more engaged, productive and loyal worker.”

This higher level of engagement will be important as the public sector continues to compete with the private sector for tech talent. “Anything that gives public sector IT staffing a competitive advantage is going to make a difference in recruitment and retention,” Snay said. In order to effectively make that shift, IT managers may need to adjust their skill sets. “We need to train people to supervise differently, to create a culture change that is built around autonomy and initiative,” she said.

Technology can help to drive this new mode. McInnes, for example, already has some of the tools and systems in place to help define measurable outcomes and work outputs.

“We have a very robust performance management system where we define outcome-based goals for every employee,” he said. “We meet with our employees three times a year and we manage against those goals: And are you on track? What obstacles are you facing?”

State and local HR and IT officials agree that going forward, such clear and measurable goals will be more important than ever in evaluating the effectiveness of IT personnel on an individual level. At the same time, they say, IT leaders also will need to consider the larger cultural issues that may arise in an increasingly work-from-home environment.

Building a team

It can be hard to sustain a coherent team culture when people don’t have a chance to interact in person on a regular basis. Zoom calls can help, “but technology is not as effective as face-to-face,” Lavigna said. “Managers are going to have to figure out how to communicate more effectively, how to create those personal interactions.”

To keep a cohesive team spirit going, IT leaders need to consider not just the frequency of communications but also the type of interactions. With remote work, there are fewer opportunities for informal
In a remote work future, it won’t be enough just to foster such interactions. IT leadership will also need to focus key metrics to ensure the cultural piece is remaining intact.

McInnes is heading down that road already, tracking turnover and conducting routine employee engagement surveys. “We take that feedback and we actually involve the teams in coming up with solutions,” he said.

In addition, McInnes is developing a directory to help people find one another within the IT organization. “We have org charts, but they don’t tell you who I am,” he said. “With people working remotely, we need something that says here’s this person, here’s what he does, here’s where he fits in the organization.”

Stewart, meanwhile, is making creative use of the ubiquitous video conference as a potential team-building tool. “For our all-employee meeting, we ask for feedback in advance: What do you want to hear about? What questions do you have?” he said. “And we always ensure that there’s time for open communication, for live questions and answers. They can ask the CIO any question they want, and we answer it right then and there.”

By implementing frequent communications, and using metrics to track satisfaction, these state and local leaders are aiming to sustain culture. That will be important, experts say, as government seeks to position itself as an employer of choice.

People work in government in part because they enjoy the sense of purpose, but that sense can easily get lost when personnel are abstracted from the physical spaces of government. Going forward, therefore, state and local IT leaders will need to double down on their messaging around mission.

“IT leaders will need to rethink their recruiting processes in order to make the most of this potential. On the upside, the rise of remote work could make it easier for IT leaders to fill open seats. With the market for tech talent ever tight, work-from-home may remove some geographic constraints, allowing recruiters to cast a wider net.”

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Recruiting revisited

On the upside, the rise of remote work could make it easier for IT leaders to fill open seats. With the market for tech talent ever tight, work-from-home may remove some geographic constraints, allowing recruiters to cast a wider net. “The whole talent pool for state jobs has opened up,” Snay said. “It’s not just geographic. Remote work has actually

Source: Pew Research Center

46% of workers who had never worked remotely pre-COVID say they’d like to continue to telecommute at least part of the time.

For those who tell that story well, remote work opens up a new avenue of opportunity. State and local government may find it somewhat easier to recruit IT talent in this new environment—but they’ll need to rethink their recruiting processes in order to make the most of this potential.

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“Historically, public-sector employment has been a pathway to the middle class for people from communities who’ve been historically left behind. These changes potentially open up those pathways, and we should be looking at those opportunities.”

been extremely advantageous for people with some disabilities, especially some mobility disabilities which have made commuting harder. Now we are able to recruit a more diverse workforce overall. All that is something for recruiters and hiring managers to keep in mind.”

McInnes said he’s already benefitted from the geographic flexibility. While Tennessee still requires that remote employees live within the state, he’s been able to hire some out-of-state people and to use remote work to ease them into the job as they go about relocating.

“It’s given them a longer time frame to do the move right,” he said. “They have time to get their logistics done, and they can already be working remotely while they’re doing this.”

Even the processes around recruiting have been improved by the rise of remote work. Stewart, for example, said it’s been easier to hire in recent months, when those involved in the process could meet virtually rather than having to convene in person.

“It’s time consuming to hire somebody. You’ve got to get panels of people together, you’ve got to schedule these interviews,” he said. “It’s a lot easier to do that in a remote world. We can get people’s time more easily, and we can get a more diverse group of people together more easily now.”

Remote work may ease recruiting, but it raises new issues around onboarding.

How best to train those incoming IT staff? While this has traditionally been a face-to-face task, some in state and local government say they are learning to onboard using a mix of in-person and virtual strategies.

Much of onboarding is just paperwork, and with digital signatures, that can all be handled from home. Stewart said. For the more hands-on aspects of training, technology can help. “We utilize our video conferencing tools, our instant messaging tools. We share screens,” he said.

McInnes likewise leans on remote onboarding capabilities, but he augments these with in-person touchpoints. “We have a quarterly new-hire group where the whole leadership team walks down the line introducing themselves,” he said. “I generally follow up with each of the new hires and do a personal welcome just to make them feel connected.”

Most agree that some degree of face-to-face interaction will remain a necessary component of the onboarding process, even in an increasingly remote work environment.

“There are learning-and-development platforms that do a nice job of showing people the culture,” Hewitt said. “But none of that can mimic an in-person experience. The best course of action is to bring those people in. It’s about making them feel part of the family. That’s how you set them up for success.”

Equity issues

Government IT organizations that do all this right still may face another series of challenges. As remote work becomes common, new questions around fairness and equity may arise.

In a survey of public-sector workers, Lavigna’s organization found that about half cannot work from home. There are those in law enforcement and emergency services, for example, who need to be physically present. It’s likely that some percentage of the IT workforce likewise will have to remain in the office as well.

“We have people who support public health, who support our prisons, as well as our psych hospital. They have to actually go in. We have desktop support people who actually have to be there to support people,” McInnes said.

How will those on-site people feel about their virtual peers? “There may be public-sector employees who want some additional compensation because they have to report to their work sites while their colleagues are sitting at home,” Lavigna said.

One way to deal with this is through overt gratitude. Stewart, for example, uses a robust recognitions and awards system to lavish praise on those who must be physically on the job. “When you’re not on
site, you don’t see what people are doing,” Stewart said. “If people are installing computers or meeting with customers, we want everyone to know about that.”

Equity issues may also arise around compensation. With the rise of remote work, state and local organizations may, for instance, be tempted to follow the federal model of localized pay scales: Those who live in lower-cost-of-living areas get paid less.

Hewitt worries that this formula can breed resentment. “I lean toward paying people what the work is worth, as opposed to paying people to meet their needs in the particular area that they’re in,” he said. This minimizes any perception of inequality, and can drive better outcomes overall. “When you over-invest in that person, you’re more likely to get higher levels of engagement.”

In terms of equity, Snay said, management needs to keep a watchful eye to ensure that work-from-home does not widen existing gaps. When people no longer share space, she suggested, there may be a tendency to cluster in camps of familiarity. That could be problematic.

“When we reduce the casual encounters, we may need to find new ways to enhance diversity,” Snay said. “What has happened historically is that your ‘friends’ tended to be people who came from the same background. Management can be delib- erate about creating greater inclusivity. Even the breakout groups in Zoom are ways of doing that, I can put you together with people that you wouldn’t normally meet. But it needs to be intentional."

On the flip side, Snay added, the shift to remote work could in fact open up the means to drive new levels of equity and fairness in the government IT workforce. “Public-sector jobs tend to be really good-quality jobs,” she said. “Historically, public-sector employment has been a pathway to the middle class for people from communities who’ve been historically left behind. These changes potentially open up those pathways, and we should be looking at those opportunities.”

With the rise of remote work, government leaders will need to address a range of emerging workforce issues. They’ll need new metrics for productivity, new tools for promoting and sustaining culture. They’ll need new thinking around recruiting, and around issues of equity.

They’ll also need to ensure that all those remote workers have the tools they need to succeed. That in turn has budgetary implications.

Going forward, IT departments “will have to be making the technology investments that enable people to succeed in a remote work scenario,” Hewitt said. “That is going to be a pretty significant investment for them long term, and they need to start planning for that now.”

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In 2014, Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson — then a gubernatorial candidate — announced his vision to make Arkansas the first state in the country to offer computer science courses in all public and charter high schools. The announcement marked the genesis of the Arkansas Computer Science Initiative — a plan that has drawn the attention of other states looking to make computer science a core part of their curriculums.

Since the launch of the program in 2015, Arkansas has increased computer science course enrollment by more than 800 percent, according to data from the state’s Department of Education. Today, more than 10,000 of the state’s high school students are enrolled in computer science courses. Anthony Owen, the department’s director of computer science education, said such progress would have only remained a dream if not for bipartisan support among state lawmakers at a time in which other states were still reluctant to focus on computer science education.
According to Owen, the program receives about $2.5 million in annual state funding, set to increase next year to $3.5 million to bolster training for computer science course instructors.

Years ago, Owen noticed a desire in other states to “slow the pace” of digitalization to save existing jobs, drawing comparisons to the fears many had about automation eliminating job openings at the advent of the Industrial Revolution. Owen thinks this misguided economic protectionism and reluctance by other states to embrace the inevitable allowed Arkansas to stand out and attract IT employers.

“That [resistance] four or five years ago is exactly the reason that some of the states are having issues that they have, that we continue to see a job shortage or the shortage of these individuals able to fill these high-demand positions,” he said.

“It was just just protectionism of existing jobs instead of looking at how to train our populace to meet the demands of this technological revolution or change in society.”

Through the initiative, students can elect to learn skills such as coding and programming to prepare them for work in tech fields. Later this year, the department plans to add emphasis on cybersecurity, data science and artificial intelligence.

EXPANDING ACCESS
Owen said one of the main goals of the program is to give students valuable IT job skills, regardless of whether they choose to pursue higher education.

“A lot of the industries out there are fine with hiring a high school graduate as long as they have the skills, the drive and desire to do these jobs,” Owen said.

“We need to be doing our job to prepare them for high-paying jobs also.”

According to a report last fall from the tech-ed policy organization Code.org Advocacy Coalition, about half of the country’s K-12 schools teach computer science. Arkansas was the first state to meet all of the report’s criteria for a comprehensive state computer science program and remains one of only a few states to do so.

Code.org Director of State Government Affairs Katie Hendrickson said Arkansas is still leading the pack in computer science education, adding that their initiative has also helped narrow racial course participation gaps.

“The state’s strategic plan for computer science education and focus on supporting teacher development are models we share with other states seeking to achieve similar outcomes,” she said.

Despite much progress, Owen said the state is still working to close the gender gap in computer science course enrollment. Act 444, passed in March, makes computer science courses a high school graduation requirement. The act also mandates additional eighth-grade computer science courses to be approved by the department and requires each high school to employ certified computer science instructors by the 2023-24 school year.

In the context of the digital divide during COVID-19 school closures, Owen noted that the Arkansas Computer Science Initiative wouldn’t have continued enrollment growth without previous state digital equity programs. The Rural Connect initiative, for example, provides broadband access to some of the state’s most remote and underserved communities.

Though most students are now back in school buildings, Owen said the state and nation have learned a lot about the need to adapt to a digital society over the past year.

“If you look for a silver lining in every cloud, I think that the pandemic exposed a lot of our weaknesses whenever it comes to our ability as a nation to work within the digital space,” he said. “We’re going to come out of it with a larger appreciation and understanding, and hopefully, a better attitude in preparing our workforce to work digitally and produce more digitally.”

MISSISSIPPI’S MISSION
Arkansas’ neighbor to the east is embarking on a similar mission to expand computer science education. Mississippi Gov. Tate Reeves signed a bill in late March requiring all the state’s elementary, middle and high schools to teach computer science by the 2024-25 academic year.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment openings in computer science and other IT-related careers are projected to grow by at least 11 percent by
2020. While those job openings will grow faster than in other fields, states have had to compete for computer scientists and IT talent as demand for tech workers continues to outpace the number of available candidates.

Mississippi’s House Bill 633 requires the state Department of Education to establish computer science curriculum for all elementary, middle and high schools by the 2024-25 academic year. State Rep. Kent McCarty says the goal of the law is for Mississippi to produce its own pool of IT talent in the years to come.

“Introducing computer science curriculum at the elementary, middle and high school levels is a huge step in the right direction for the next generation of Mississippians. We need to expose our students at the earliest possible level to the tools they need for the jobs of the future,” said McCarty, who serves as vice chair of the state’s education committee.

In 2016, the state announced its Computer Science for Mississippi Initiative to train computer science course instructors. Mississippi Rep. Richard Bennett, chair of the education committee, said there’s still work to be done to help fill computer science career openings.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, many of these openings focus on cloud computing, data storage and information security. Bennett said there are currently about 1,500 IT-related openings in Mississippi alone. Meanwhile, only half of the state’s schools offer computer science curriculum courses.

“For Mississippi to attract new businesses, we need to focus on building a high-quality, well-educated workforce in each community across the state,” he said.

The bill will require the state Department of Education to formulate a list of high-quality courses and approved vendors to work as partners to further the bill’s goals. State officials have allocated about $1 million in state funding for the law’s requirements, according to McCarty, and Mississippi-based tech company C Spire is donating an additional $1 million toward education department efforts. The current effort was actually underway, with broad support, in 2020, but was derailed when the pandemic interrupted legislative sessions.

The Department of Education’s Chief Academic Officer Nathan Oakley said education officials will develop courses and additional guidelines required through the legislation set to take effect this summer.

“Education leaders, industry partners and elected officials recognize the growing job market in computer science and are committed to creating new computer science opportunities in the coming years,” he said.

**PROGRESS FROM A PIONEER**

Five years ago, Rhode Island committed to putting a computer science class in every public school. The Computer Science for Rhode Island (CS4RI) initiative was launched in 2016 by former Rhode Island Gov. Gina Raimondo. In her last State of the State address before becoming U.S. Commerce secretary, Raimondo said the initiative made Rhode Island the first state in the U.S. to teach the subject in every public school.

Technically, the program, now in its fifth year, provides computer science courses in all the state’s comprehensive public schools — meaning, not charter schools — and 86 percent of its high schools altogether, including 60 public and charter districts. A majority of them have more than one computer science course.

Spencer Sherman, chief for innovation of the Rhode Island Department of Education, said the program was launched to give the employees of tomorrow a head start in computer science and coding.

“We have elementary school classes, middle school classes, high school classes and connections with colleges and employers who are all part of this pipeline,” he said.

Sherman said the program largely centers on training computer science instructors, leveraging partnerships with institutions such as Brown University and the University of Rhode Island, as well as Microsoft’s Technology Education and Literacy in Schools (TEALS) program. The state allocated $210,000 in annual funds for professional development, and over 1,000 educators have been trained since the initiative began five years ago.

“The way to actually make this system work and improve this system is to make sure all of the pieces are connected, and that’s what we’ve done,” Sherman said.

CS4RI also recently awarded grants to 20 state high schools to establish computer science career courses that integrate the curriculum with workplace experience, to study how that impacts Advanced Placement exam scores. This aspect of the program, funded through a $2.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education, gave $20,000 to each participating school to establish computer science labs, free teacher training and three free student courses, totaling 12 college credits.

Ten of those 20 schools are now implementing new computer science courses this semester, which will include an 80-hour work-based learning requirement.

**FOCUSED ON EQUITY**

According to a report last fall from the Code.org Advocacy Coalition, Computer Science Teachers Association (CSTA) and Expanding Computing Education Pathways (ECEP) Alliance, only 47 percent of schools in the U.S. teach computer science. Racial disparities in participation and access
still exist across the board, with Rhode Island still working to close those gaps. The report noted that Hispanic, Latinx and Native American students were 1.6 times less likely than their white and Asian peers to attend a school that offers AP computer science courses. Black students were 1.3 times less likely than their white and Asian peers to attend a school that offers those courses, and 1.4 times less likely to take an AP computer science exam in schools that offer it.

CSTA Executive Director Jake Baskin said states like Rhode Island, as well as Arkansas and others embracing similar computer science initiatives in public schools, are working to reverse these trends. “We’re seeing the impact of policies that made it a requirement for schools to offer computer science and combined that with real funding to support the development of teachers on the ground so they can actually teach those courses,” he said. “Computer science is the fastest-growing and most in-demand job area, and I think it is just an essential foundational skill for every student to learn, to be able to understand the world that they’re living in. ... It’s generally the No. 1 open field for positions in every state across the country at any given time.”

Sherman said CS4RI wants to increase enrollment among underrepresented students, from groups largely left out of the tech workforce. Out of 300 total 10th and 11th graders in the first of three courses in the work-based program, 35 percent are female, 60 percent are students of color and 62 percent are considered low-income. AP participation has also risen among female students, according to the state. “A huge part of this work has been focusing on women in computer science and people of color in computer science, because they have been historically underrepresented,” he said. Nearly 3,000 students across the state have earned credit from the University of Rhode Island through enrollment courses since CS4RI began in 2016. AP computer science exam participation increased from 43 students in 2016 to nearly 740 in 2020. The state also noted a 55 percent increase in computer science post-secondary degrees at public higher education institutions since the beginning of the program, with 195 degrees awarded in 2020.

As the economy is changing, our education system is changing ahead of time to make sure kids are prepared when they leave the system,” Sherman said. Baskin said states like Rhode Island could serve as a model for others looking to bolster career IT development. States like Alabama, Idaho, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Arkansas and a handful of others allow computer science to count toward core admission requirements in colleges and universities.

Digital equity remains a challenge for courses like those offered in Rhode Island. In order for programs such as CS4RI to continue building IT skills, Sherman said students need access to the tech itself, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic that necessitated remote and hybrid learning. According to statistics from the consumer advocacy group BroadbandNow, 98.5 percent of Rhode Islanders have connection speeds slower than 25 Mbps. Sherman said the state has worked to provide every student with an Internet device through its 1:1 program, using a combination of state, federal and private funding mechanisms to close the digital divide and make CS4RI courses accessible during school closures.

“There’s an acceleration of the work that we were already planning on doing, and I think the good part about Rhode Island is, we are ready for that shift as it comes,” he said. “I think we knew computer science is going to be an essential part of the modern economy, and I think COVID pushed it up even further. “That’s not to say we [completely] closed the equity gaps,” he added. “Those issues are deep, but I think we were a little ahead of the curve when [the pandemic] started up.”

Anthony Owen (right), director of computer science for the Arkansas Department of Education (pictured with Gov. Asa Hutchinson, left), said the state’s embrace of computer science in K-12 schools has allowed it to attract tech employers.
The Future of Work: Empowered by the Cloud

How has the pandemic changed the work of government and what will those changes mean for the government workforce? The COVID-19 pandemic changed the public sector from a largely office-based workforce to one where many employees will work remotely. Remote work has also changed views about how work can be done and how people interact with each other. Government leaders now see that maintaining high productivity does not require everyone to be in the office. The pandemic — and the need to work from home — demonstrated how cloud technologies and remote work can enable employees to be more effective and efficient. Moving forward, governments will use the cloud to create a stable and scalable infrastructure that supports communications, interaction and workflows online. Thence governments will need to empower workers with the knowledge and skills to leverage cloud tools in the most effective way.

How can the cloud help governments support a fully remote or hybrid workforce? The cloud enables the secure and scalable environment that supports a virtual desktop solution for remote workers. This solution gives employees access to all the applications and data they need, using low-cost devices, and simplifies IT management and security. Hosting applications and data in the cloud also maintains high compliance with a government’s security requirements.

What areas of cloud technology will offer new job opportunities? How can governments train their employees to fill those roles? Moving to the cloud preserves current IT job roles while expanding the need for talent in mobile application development, cybersecurity and infrastructure design. To fill these roles, government can partner with education institutions and cloud providers to develop training for current employees as well as new hires who are just beginning their careers. For example, partnerships in several states now provide instructor resources and curricula for higher education institutions and high schools, creating a pipeline of cloud and cybersecurity specialists.

How will future technology innovation help government streamline operational tasks and improve citizen services? Governments can apply technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning and predictive analytics in a purposeful way to enhance workflows and decision-making. The cloud supports these technologies with a central data lake and analytics solution that bring in data from silos across multiple programs or agencies. Using these cloud resources, employees can become more effective and efficient in how they do their work, make decisions and interact with the public.

What is a key strategy for a government to develop its future workforce? Government cannot do it alone. There needs to be a partnership of government, education institutions and technology companies to identify new job requirements, then develop the training and resources that will advance the government workforce now and into the future.

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Virtually Employed
New tools and approaches to getting citizens back to work.

By Julia Edinger / Staff Writer

As record-high unemployment rates swept the nation last year in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, former Rhode Island Gov. Gina Raimondo announced an initiative called Back to Work RI. A public-private partnership designed to support Rhode Islanders who are seeking a job, the state-led initiative works with employers throughout the state to upskill and employ job seekers.

This mission led to the creation of the Virtual Career Center (VCC), developed through a partnership with Google Cloud and the non-profit Research Improving People’s Lives (RIPL). The VCC platform, built by Google partner Maven Wave, uses artificial intelligence and machine learning to help form connections between job seekers and employment opportunities. The platform was planned, designed and implemented with a focus on usability through a team from Google’s professional services organization, with customer engineers working closely with the state’s Department of Labor and Training (DLT) and RIPL.

Perhaps what makes the virtual platform distinctive is the creative approach that the partners took in envisioning its design. As described by Sarah Blasiewicz, assistant director of Workforce Development for DLT, the team had to determine what exactly this business would look like in a virtual setting. Prior to 2020, business was conducted completely in person in an office, as Rhode Island had several physical career centers across the state with career coaches and specialists. To adapt this process to the new platform, DLT’s team and Google had to take on a new perspective to determine what the front desk of a VCC might look like, how to design the website so that it would be intuitive, and whether the terms they were using were jargon or user-friendly.

“It was really just taking yourself out of your physical office space and trying to figure out how to adopt a technology-driven approach to this work,” explained Blasiewicz.

According to Todd Schroeder, director of public-sector digital strategy with Google Cloud, it was very much a paradigm shift to envision this process in a different way. The collaborative effort considered all stakeholders, including ideas from the top, but also from the staff familiar with the processes.

“That ultimately designed a better end result for the job seekers and the employers,” said Schroeder.

The urgency that the pandemic created required the DLT team to not only think
The Future of Work: Closing the Skills Gap

In this Q&A, Tony Holmes, Practice Lead for Solutions Architects Public Sector at Pluralsight, discusses how state and local government agencies can better understand their skills gaps to enable better workforce development.

How are government agencies taking new and innovative approaches to retraining and upskilling their existing workforce?
Agencies are dealing with a skills gap that has been a problem for some time, and COVID has made this problem even more complex. Agencies are having to rethink how they execute on their strategies and close the skills gaps without having as much in-person training.

More and more, agencies are seeing tech platforms like Pluralsight for virtual learning. One of the benefits of this model is that Pluralsight has the ability to benchmarkmark skills and create individualized learning paths.

How can agencies create programs around skills development, and why should they invest in skills development programs?
One of the best ways to create a culture of learning. This means giving employees permission to learn. The traditional approach has been to keep training separate from the actual job. Forward-thinking organizations realize that technologists' training needs to be a part of their day-to-day jobs. It is one thing when the boss says, "Go and take a little time to do some learning," but it is absolutely another thing when the CIO says, "I expect our technologists to learn as part of their jobs." Making time for learning has always been a struggle within government, but agencies need to move away from the idea that people cannot afford to take time away from their jobs to learn new skills.

How can an agency most effectively assess the technical skill levels of their staff?
In the past agency leaders would typically call an auditor or consultancy. They would spend months evaluating peoples’ skills and write a report based on the agency’s objectives. The whole process might take six months or more, by which time the mission priorities might have changed. Pluralsight uses tools like artificial intelligence and machine learning to perform a skills gap analysis in real time. Executives go into the analytics within the platform to get a real-time view of where they are at that point in terms of skills. The data is always up to date. We also provide suggestions of content that can help agencies easily provide additional training. One of the biggest obstacles we have as learners is that we don't know what we don't know; we don't know what we need to learn.

What is involved in implementing a workforce development strategy?
Our customers gain a huge amount of success from using data and analytics tools. The data drives the transformation of programs, and you need the right tools to address the problems you have encountered with workforce development. They also need that culture of learning within the organization to help sharpen employees' skills.

One successful example is Utah’s Department of Technology Services (DTS). DTS wanted to leverage tools to help its employees build new skills and identify areas where additional training could help the agency adapt to the sea change in how the state does business. With more than 7,000 online courses across more than 850 technologies, Pluralsight’s web-based Skills platform offered a range of training and tools for DTS employees. DTS managers also worked with Pluralsight to create "channels" of aggregated training content.

At the same time, DTS used Pluralsight’s Flow platform to help managers take a closer look at ongoing projects for potential skills gaps. By analyzing code from projects in progress, managers have targeted additional skill-building for their teams based on the efficiency of the work being done.

Pluralsight is the leading technology workforce development company that helps companies and teams build better products by developing critical skills, improving processes and gaining insights through data, and providing strategic-skills consulting. Trusted by forward-thinking companies of every size in every industry, Pluralsight helps individuals and businesses transform with technology. Pluralsight Skills helps enterprises build technology skills at scale with expert-authored courses on today’s most important technologies, including cloud, artificial intelligence and machine learning, data science, and security, among others. For more information about Pluralsight visit www.pluralsight.com/industry/government

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about things from a different angle but also to do so on an extremely tight time-line. While many projects of this size and complexity can take more than a year, the VCC was created in weeks. The partners worked quickly to achieve continuous release through a series of sprints, allowing for improvements based on priority.

Google Cloud’s involvement opens the door for a wide range of capabilities with tools such as BigQuery, Cloud SQL, Cloud Storage and Cloud Talent Solution powering VCC. The platform is also compatible with applications like Google Calendar and Google Meet, simplifying the process for scheduling and conducting interviews. It incorporates tools like Google Docs and Gmail that many users are already familiar with.

“What Google brought to the table that I think made it a unique project … was all of the G Suite technology,” Blusiewicz said. “We really wanted it to be an easy transition where it was a technology that felt like you had been using it for years when really, in fact, it was a brand-new thing.”

While some aspects of the program are brand new, the data is not stored on a separate system from regular UI data. Rhode Island has data storage procedures and protocols in place, and Google adds its own layers of security measures through the Workspace and Google Cloud platform, including meeting a host of certifications like FedRAMP.

“The career center platform runs on Cloud itself, a technology platform that’s conceived, designed and built securely from the ground up,” explained Schroeder.

Perhaps the most impressive feature of the VCC is the use of machine learning technology and artificial intelligence, which vastly increase the potential of creating strong matches between job seekers and employers. Because the VCC embeds the AI machine learning algorithm, the platform gets “smarter” as more people use it, continuously gaining accuracy and creating more suitable pairings. Users can be paired with jobs that similarly situated people have had success with, or they can be paired based on matching skill sets from the user’s resume.

Though born out of necessity during the pandemic, the VCC will continue to connect Rhode Islanders to work with a modern and intuitive system that outlives the present environment. As Blusiewicz explained, they were able to turn a tragic moment into a transformative moment in how state government delivers customer service.

The Indiana Story

According to the Indiana Department of Workforce Development (DWD), in December 2020, Indiana’s unemployment rate was 4.3 percent. While that is under the national rate of 6.7 percent, it is significantly higher than the rate the previous year: 3.2 percent. COVID-19 has made that number less surprising, but no less daunting, to Indiana officials.

These figures prompted the state and AI-powered talent intelligence platform Eightfold AI to create the Hoosier Talent Network (HTN), intended to connect job seekers across the state with suitable employment. In addition to using artificial intelligence to match job seekers to jobs, the platform also helps match them with relevant training opportunities. All of this works to bolster Indiana’s workforce using machine learning technology.

“Weith the Hoosier Talent Network, the key part will be that once we know your preferences, the platform starts to inform you and alert you that there’s something available for you that you might be interested in,” said Kamal Ahluwalia, president of Eightfold AI.
How does digital transformation change the needed skills and work focus for government IT teams?

To be successful, digital transformation requires more collaborative work—what I call more boats rowing in the same direction. More coordination will be involved so that IT employees and teams can hand off their work to each other. Another important demand requirement will be to deliver the right IT services to employees and partners for internal work and to the public for digital government services. This work will be supported by a culture that is focused on continuous value delivery for constituents.

How will the operations and development work of IT teams change to meet these demands?

We learned a lot from the COVID-19 pandemic about how collaborative work can be done remotely. These lessons will continue to influence IT work over the long term. Projects will move faster and have more handoffs, but these changes will allow IT to deliver resources faster as new priorities arise. In turn, application developers will be able to use those resources to deliver new digital services faster. IT will also increasingly focus on delivering smaller, incremental features and capabilities that benefit developers, internal users and constituents.

What training and experience will help IT staff gain the right skillsets to work on digital transformation programs?

Study your own past successes and look at how other governments have successfully moved toward digital transformation. Also look for examples from the private sector, such as for e-commerce websites, because many of the same principles apply to government services. These examples may point to needed training, such as for user experience design. This knowledge doesn't necessarily require an additional degree. Valuable training can be obtained from online classes and resources that will help with immediate project needs.

Technology will also help as governments look beyond a local employee base. For example, a virtual reality classroom will support online training for employees, whether working in the office or remotely.

What changes will digital transformation bring to IT culture?

Successful adoption of new digital technologies requires a focus on needed changes in the internal IT culture. Yet new technologies can also reinforce those culture factors, for example by abstracting certain interactions to allow for more service automation across organizational silos. These capabilities reinforce the culture change that enables more cooperation across teams and accelerates digital transformation.

About Red Hat

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The new platform will dramatically simplify the process for Hoosiers looking to online government employment services. Chad Carter, DWDD’s HTN project leader, is responsible for workforce systems for the state.

“Adding HTN has provided a new partnership with Eightfold and a tool to help Hoosiers find and explore job opportunities with cutting-edge technology,” Carter said.

DWDD describes its goals as developing a premier workforce and enticing businesses to relocate to Indiana; the HTN seeks to fulfill these goals by employing, reskilling and upskilling the state’s workforce.

One thing that makes this platform effective is the use of Equal Opportunity Algorithms to prevent bias. What that means is that neither age, gender nor ethnicity plays a role in the predictions made.

In addition to taking those factors out of the decision process, the platform can mask the profiles, letting employers focus on the candidates and their capabilities rather than other factors that are not relevant. Other elements that help provide equal opportunity include an increased emphasis on writing a more accurate job description and a dashboard that allows job seekers to see how their application is progressing at each stage.

“We have completely changed the candidate experience,” Ahluwalia explained, noting that not only does the platform recommend jobs, but it also explains why that job may be a good fit. “The AI technology allows the platform to go beyond what is listed on the resume, taking other factors into consideration. For example, a veteran can be matched with a company that other veterans have done well in.”

“Hoosier unemployment has remained high into 2021 and the HTN platform is positioned to connect individuals to open jobs as quickly as possible, ultimately helping all aspects of the economy,” said Carter.

With approximately 100,000 open jobs across the state as of March 2021, Carter is hopeful the new platform and the tools within it will help more accurately place job seekers with employment.

“Our hope is that by utilizing Eightfold’s AI technology and tool based on skills and abilities, versus keywords, individuals will find job connections quicker and with better accuracy,” detailed Carter.

In addition to gathering data on job seekers’ current skill sets, the technology also provides insight into how they can expand their capabilities. If certain skills appear to be missing from a user’s profile, the HTN will suggest skills that could easily be learned to further expand career possibilities.

In the coming years, the skill sets needed by employers are likely to transform due to things like new technology, increased remote work and automation. The emphasis on helping match job seekers with easily learnable skills is one way to combat this impending transformation.

“The reality is — whether it’s because of AI or otherwise — most of our jobs are going to change in the next three to five years,” noted Ahluwalia. “So, to some extent, it’s upon us to actually make sure that we are relevant.”

joedinger@govtech.com

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100K jobs were open in Indiana as of March 2021.

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Mythics is helping organizations across the U.S. save money, ensure business continuity, and enhance user experiences by implementing public, private or hybrid cloud solutions.

See How North Carolina General Assembly had dramatic gains with Oracle HCM Cloud and Mythics Consulting featured in this Issue.

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The human resources (HR) division for the North Carolina General Assembly serves the needs of about 1,000 employees — from 170 legislators and their staff to housekeepers, cafeteria workers, police officers, interns and administrative employees. A substantial amount of HR activity involves annual hiring surges as the legislative session begins, then keeping up with frequent employee changes year-round.

"Because each Assembly member can hire their own office staff, someone could be hired without being entered into the HR system for a few days, and then the HR team has to catch up," says Garrett Dimond, a legislative services project manager for the North Carolina General Assembly. "This work is like supporting 170 individual companies, and it’s important that we offer personnel service to the members."

Customized processes are also important for meeting numerous and detailed employment rules, as well as delivering HR services for other Assembly employees. Any new HR system would need to serve the Assembly as a complete enterprise.

**ADOPTING A CLOUD SOLUTION FOR HR**

The North Carolina General Assembly previously used an on-premises core HR management system, in place for more than 20 years, that was no longer supported by the vendor. Specific HR functions, such as payroll, were hosted on separate, siloed systems. Lack of integration between the systems meant many processes relied on paper! The HR and payroll teams often needed to enter data manually into multiple systems.

For a replacement HR system, the Assembly’s legislative services and IT staff evaluated options in a competitive bid process. This process led to selection of Oracle Human Capital Management (HCM) Cloud.

Although the Oracle HCM solution met the Assembly’s requirements for HR and payroll functions, two additional factors were critical in the decision. First was Oracle support for integration with other systems, important to North Carolina because of the extensive customization in its employment processes and rules. Second was the foundation offered by Oracle to support broader business processes, which will help the organization’s operations become more agile.

“Oracle didn’t just give us a new HR technology solution, it also helped us create a new solution for business processes,” says Dimond.

The Assembly’s Oracle HCM Cloud solution went live on January 4, 2021. Dimond describes the deployment as “textbook,” even as it was completed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The new HR system easily passed a critical test when all employees were paid correctly on the first payday after implementation.

Because the Assembly’s IT team did not have Oracle experience, and for help with needed system integrations, North Carolina chose Mythics for consulting assistance. Mythics led implementation of the recruiting module in Oracle HCM Cloud as well as the technical effort to convert data from the legacy system. Mythics also worked with Oracle consultants to develop 12 custom system integrations and three custom reports.

“The knowledge of integrations and Oracle solutions in the Mythics team was very important to us and helped us in going through the system transition,” says Kelly Stallings, the project’s technical lead.

“Mythics provided responsible, confident, well-trained individuals who took ownership of our needs and issues, and worked quickly to solve them,” adds Dimond. “It was a well-qualified team and one that was always agile and got the job done.”

**IMPROVEMENTS ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION**

The Oracle HCM Cloud solution and Mythics integration work has produced multiple benefits for the HR and IT teams, as well as the General Assembly as an organization.
Time savings. Integration of the recruiting module with Oracle Global HR saves the HR team time and supports easier interaction with legislators. Other system integrations also save time by making tasks more efficient for employees, who can often enter their own information online. The IT team saves time because Oracle manages and maintains the core HCM solution in the cloud.

Mobile support. Giving employees access to information and tasks on their mobile devices, especially for entering timesheets or viewing paycheck stubs, reduces use of paper-based processes.

A single system for everyone. A common HCM system for all Assembly divisions enables collaborative work among HR and administrative staff.

A standard payroll schedule. With a single payroll solution for the enterprise, the Assembly now supports a semi-monthly payroll schedule for all employees.

Improved employee experience. The convenience of HR self-service tools on mobile devices produces a better user experience for all Assembly employees. “The new system improves employee morale and deepens their connection to the General Assembly because they have easy access to all of their payroll and benefits data,” says Dimond.

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STRATEGIES FOR A SMOOTH TRANSITION
Implementing a new HR system is a major undertaking for any government organization. To make the transition easier, Dimond and Stallings offer two key recommendations.

Before beginning, make sure the change to a new system is supported with strong direction from top leaders. After the transition is complete, this direction will help maintain a focus on improving HR and business processes across the organization.

To make implementation easier, consider working with an expert consultant that has a partnership with the primary system vendor.

“A FOUNDATION FOR BROAD MODERNIZATION
The North Carolina General Assembly achieved its goals for a new, modern HR system. The Oracle HCM Cloud solution offers capabilities that better serve the Assembly’s dynamic employee base. And by extending the solution beyond traditional HR functions, staff across the organization can work together more easily and improve processes that underpin Assembly business.”

“You may spend more money initially but look at this as a good investment compared to other solutions that may require more long-term work,” says Dimond.
Surge Protection

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic last year, over half of state unemployment websites experienced significant outages as nearly 22 million Americans filed for unemployment benefits in the span of a few weeks. At the time, part of the explanation for these outages was that many state government agencies had simply never anticipated receiving such a high volume of traffic. Others noted that they were still running outdated systems and had not yet migrated to the cloud. But a year later, many state and local government agencies are back in the exact same position, as numerous government websites have crashed as residents flocked online to make vaccination appointments.

These problems have been seen across the nation and have continued for months. In January, multiple Florida county government websites — including those in Broward, Pinellas and Hillsborough — crashed as older adults went online to try to book appointments for the first available vaccines. In February, the Massachusetts state scheduling website crashed the week that people age 65 and older became eligible for the vaccine. And in March, the Cook County, Ill., vaccine registration website crashed after they made vaccines available to residents with certain underlying health conditions. During its peak, the website received half a million requests per second, according to officials.

Part of the problem was that in the absence of an effective federal solution to the vaccine scheduling problem, each state or local government health agency had to develop its own solution. The result was significant confusion for the average individual because there was no single website where they could go to register for a vaccine appointment or get on the list for an appointment. The confusion was particularly acute in some states, like New Jersey, where there was no statewide solution and different counties, municipalities and health-care systems each offered their own separate scheduling platforms.

Another problem was that many states, including California, Colorado, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Washington, opted to use the same ill-prepared vendor for their online vaccine scheduling system. The software maker — a self-described “tiny little nonprofit” which had originally created software to streamline flu vaccine consent forms in schools in Maryland — was insufficiently prepared to manage and support a national vaccination effort. The vendor blamed “a sudden and unprecedented surge in traffic to the site,” a flimsy excuse given the anticipated high demand for vaccinations among Americans. Local health officials in California blamed these software glitches for some of the delays in rolling out the vaccine in the state.

Indeed, one of the few places where individuals have been able to reliably go online and schedule a vaccine appointment is not with these government websites but with one of the national pharmacies, such as Walmart, CVS and RiteAid, participating in the vaccine rollout. For example, as of April 1, CVS had administered 10 million COVID-19 vaccine doses across 2,000 stores in 44 states, and Walmart was administering vaccines in 3,800 locations across the United States.

A key element to their successful vaccine appointment websites has not just been sufficient server and staffing capacity, but also good design. Indeed, most businesses understand that having user-friendly interfaces and strong back ends are critical to their operational success. CVS, for example, has made several design updates to its website to make it easier for customers to schedule a vaccination appointment. On the CVS website, customers see information about who is eligible for the vaccine, which stores are offering shots, whether any appointments are available and when the information was last updated. In contrast, in Massachusetts, residents seeking a vaccination had to first fill out pages of personal information before they could even see available appointment times, leading to many frustrated users who had to continue repeatedly entering the same information every time the website crashed or they wanted to check again for an available slot.

It is almost certain that there will be future unprecedented events that generate similar surges. From building more scalable, cloud-based websites, to selecting more qualified private-sector partners, to using better design, there are many lessons that government agencies can learn from these failures to prepare for future challenges.
How Current Work Trends Will Impact the Future of Elections

The same trends that are shaping the future of work throughout the public sector — including remote work, digital transformation and an emphasis on data and analytics — are also impacting elections agencies. It is easy to think of elections as something that only occur once every couple of years. But election management is a year-round job encompassing everything from candidate filings and campaign finance reports to voting machine inventories, poll worker management and cybersecurity.

To better understand the perspective on the future of work for elections agencies, Government Technology interviewed Ron Davis, the CEO and co-founder of EasyVote Solutions, which provides comprehensive election management solutions to governments throughout the United States.

How are expectations changing for local county and city elections officials in the coming years?

Election offices across the nation will need to be more transparent and find efficiencies in the election/voting process as well as gain access to more of the data they generate each election. Local jurisdictions will need to offer their voters more choices in how they vote. To complete this in a timely manner, the local jurisdiction must provide more data and process automation to ensure voters are eligible and have the best possible voting experience.

What about at the state level? What are the priorities driving state elections officials?

Consistency of processes among all local jurisdictions. While local jurisdictions have the responsibility of carrying out the election, the state will need to ensure all jurisdictions, large and small, follow the same election processes. States will need to establish best practice processes for all their jurisdictions and measure local jurisdiction effectiveness.

What are the biggest ways voting will change in the coming years?

Predictive analytics, more customer self-service and more customer choice (for different ways to cast a ballot) will all be important, as well as online and remote learning (for poll workers and other employees).

What changes do you anticipate on the national level?

I believe a national voter registration database will be used so every local and state jurisdiction can process voters quicker and more accurately. I also see a wait-time indicator for in-person voting becoming a requirement for all counties across the nation.

With increased scrutiny across all facets of elections, how are elections offices preparing to be more transparent and accountable?

Election offices are looking to their software vendors to help them display where they are in each of the steps of the election process. Election offices in the future will be able to show more about how the process of running elections happens.

What can elections offices do to help combat voter misinformation and purposeful disinformation campaigns?

Many are preparing educational material for the public to understand how they prepare for elections and how they conduct elections. The hope is to reduce misconceptions when someone sees or hears about a portion of the election process.

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Lyft is following in the footsteps of its competitor Uber in getting out of the self-driving car game. The ride-share company is selling its autonomous development vehicle arm, called Level 5, to Toyota for $550 million. The move comes in an effort to cut research and development spending as Lyft works to become profitable.

Google announced improvements to its voice assistant that will hopefully make it function a bit more naturally. Users will have the ability to teach the AI how to correctly pronounce names of contacts, plus it will be able to better follow conversations. So, for example, asking Google to set a timer for 20 minutes and then changing your mind and asking for 30 minutes instead will actually work.

Password managers are touted as a practical, secure way to manage the unique passwords you’re supposed to have for each website and app you encounter. The risk, of course, is if the manager gets hacked, all your private information is accessible. That’s what happened to 29,000 users of the Passwordstate password manager for two days in April, when the app’s creator told customers that its upgrade mechanism had been compromised and malicious files had been installed on user computers. Experts say two-factor authentication, which is available for Passwordstate, is critical for avoiding such issues when using password managers.

More research, more science, more technology.

CRYPTO CLIMATE CRISIS: Cryptocurrency consumes a ton of energy; bitcoin, which accounts for more than half the market, reportedly has a carbon footprint similar to Hong Kong’s. A new “Crypto Climate Accord” led by blockchain companies like Ripple and ConsenSys has set some lofty goals to fix that: transition all cryptocurrency to renewable energy by 2030; hit net-zero emissions by 2040; and set up an open source standard that can be used to measure the industry’s emissions.

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Send Spectrum ideas to Managing Editor Lauren Harrison, lharrison@govtech.com
The Future of Work: A Hybrid Model for Contact Centers

What changes made during the pandemic are now the norm for contact centers?
Contact center managers feared the shift to remote work during the pandemic would be too difficult. In some cases, it was a painful change, but it also opened new opportunities that weren’t available before, especially for agents.

For many reasons, I don’t see contact centers returning to full on-site operation again. Working from home raised agent satisfaction and decreased attrition. Agents appreciate the flexibility and see more meaning in their contribution to government service delivery.

How can employees deliver a quality experience as they serve continuing high call volumes?
As average wait times increased during call surges, contact centers leveraged multiple communication channels to deliver a quality caller experience. Yet even with the demands of the pandemic response, agent empathy levels for callers have gone up and will continue to remain high. A government can sustain this experience by looking for more online and automated tools as alternatives for routine calls.

How can technology help agents gain needed skills and work productively from home? How can it help managers train and lead effectively?
Remote work means managers can no longer provide the traditional in-person and on-the-spot agent coaching. Yet workforce engagement and analytics solutions provide more insight about agent activity than can be gained by walking around a physical contact center.

It’s also important to understand that best practices and performance metrics may need to change to reflect remote work. Agent coaching may involve more use of gamification to motivate learning and improvement, or data that shows agents how their performance impacts the agency’s mission.

What factors will be important to retain experienced agents?
Agent performance metrics, manager observations and tools that detect caller sentiment can help identify agents who excel with certain topics or types of calls. Managers can route more of those calls to those agents, increasing both caller and agent satisfaction.

Looking ahead, what will the work model look like for contact centers? What will this model mean for agent work and recruiting?
I expect many contact centers will operate in a hybrid model where agents work part-time remotely and part-time in the office. Supporting this model requires a good forecasting capability to identify ebbs and flows in the staffing levels needed to deliver a good citizen experience. These forecasts also support scheduling flexibility for agents, including the ability to bid on shifts and trade them with coworkers. For the agency, a hybrid model expands the potential recruitment area for agents: it can now reach across an entire region or state.
Every day on govtech.com, we explore a question about something new happening in the tech (and tech-adjacent) world. Here’s a look at a few recent Questions of the Day. For more, visit govtech.com/QoD, or subscribe to our newsletter to get them daily in your inbox.

This teeny-tiny washing machine will help you clean what?

**Answer:** Your true wireless earbuds.

Don’t you sometimes wish that you could just toss your earbuds into the washing machine to get them clean? It would be so much easier than trying to do it all by hand (because let’s face it, that never gets them truly clean)! If this is you, then you’re in luck — a teeny-tiny washing machine for earbuds may be on the way.

It’s currently the subject of a Kickstarter campaign, which comes with its own risks and is no guarantee the device will actually make it to production and into the hands of consumers. If it does, though, the Cardlax Earbuds Washer sounds like it could be a fun little tool.

There is still a little bit of elbow grease involved, as you first have to clean out the openings of the earbuds with the included brush tool. But after that, you just have to pop them into the device, which looks a lot like a top-loading washing machine in miniature, and away it goes. From there, the Cardlax uses a motorized cleaning brush, some cleaning solution and a polisher to make the earbuds squeaky clean. While the campaign specifically uses Apple’s AirPods as an example, it claims that the device will work with 99 percent of other true wireless earbuds as well.

What can you now get through DoorDash besides food?

**Answer:** A COVID-19 test.

DoorDash wants to make it easier for people to get tested for COVID-19. That’s why users of the food delivery app in select cities will be able to order a test kit with same-day delivery.

Users will be able to choose between two different kits: the EveryWell nasal swab kit for $109, or the Vault Health saliva kit for $119, both of which can provide results in 24 hours. The option will be available in 12 cities initially, including Baltimore, Chicago, Cleveland, Denver, Minneapolis, Phoenix and Dallas, with more locations intended in the future.

"COVID-19 testing will continue to play a critical role as businesses and schools begin to re-open across the U.S," DoorDash said in a press release. "Tests that can be taken at home and mailed to a lab offer even more convenience to customers as they eliminate the need to make a trip to a testing facility, or wait in long lines at the pharmacy or grocery store."

How do beavers feel about the Internet?

**Answer:** It seems they’re not fans.

The beavers who live near a small town in Canada have made their feelings about the Internet known. Residents of Tumbler Ridge in northeastern British Columbia lost their Internet service for 36 hours over one weekend in April when the critters decided to declare war on the underground fiber cables that supply it.

The beavers were reportedly digging in search of building materials for their dam when they uncovered local Internet service provider Telus’ fiber-optic cable buried three feet underground. At multiple points along the line, the beavers chewed through the 4.5-inch protective layer around the cables, as well as the cables themselves.

As a result of the beavers’ behavior, 900 people lost Internet service, 60 people lost cable TV and local cell service was disrupted. Photos from Telus’ repair crews show cable marking tape as part of the beavers’ finished dam. At least they made good use of some of what they destroyed.

Send Spectrum ideas to Managing Editor Lauren Harrison, lharrison@govtech.com
Navigating Toward an Inclusive Future of Work: Challenges and Opportunities for State and Local Governments

The pandemic has accelerated changes in the government workplace that will last far beyond the short-term return to physical offices. In this Q&A, Mike Witzman, Systems Engineering Director for Cisco’s U.S. State and Local Government and Education, describes how governments can prepare for constituent and employee needs in the "next normal."

What will government workplaces look like over the next six to 18 months?

The return to office is going to be gradual, but the biggest caveat is that it isn’t a return to what we had. There is a new normal – governments are already saying they’ll need less space, and in the future, may need to flex back again. But there are also long-term benefits to the hybrid workplace. Governments can use this trend to tap broader talent pools, which is already happening in higher education and other sectors.

How will governments need to modernize their IT infrastructure to manage hybrid work environments?

When your employees work from anywhere, it fundamentally changes traffic flows. You are managing and accountable for apps and services delivered over the Internet. You need to keep the security policy centralized, but the controls must be distributed and largely delivered from the cloud, using capabilities like Secure Access Service Edge (SASE).

Within their physical infrastructure, governments may need less space – but they will require more technology in that space. Density monitoring is here to stay at the floor and room levels, and can be integrated with smart lighting to ensure offices are empty before sanitizing surfaces with UVC light. We also expect most meetings going forward to have at least one remote participant. Buildings will need to be refit to create flexible, secure and efficient video-enabled workspaces that can easily adapt to the needs of a constantly changing group of workers.

What are the priorities as governments continue to offer and expand digital service delivery?

We see cities and states adopting portals with capabilities like secure single sign-on as opposed to an agency-by-agency approach. One of the biggest trends we’re seeing now involves modernizing contact centers. States and cities are gaining efficiencies and new capabilities by deploying a single cloud contact center platform they can tailor to serve all agencies. Introducing the right mix of self-service chatbots – driven by machine learning – with trained staff is enabling agencies to reach and serve more constituents. State and local governments are also actively working to bridge the digital divide to ensure government and critical private services like telehealth benefit all constituents.

How will governments manage workforce and leadership development in a hybrid work environment?

Like everything else, recruiting and workforce development has moved online. There is a degree of burnout when everything is done the same way. Augmenting self-paced video training with instructor and expert-led live sessions increases engagement and learning. At the same time, continuing education has moved to self-paced microcredentialing and microcourses, and that is accelerating.

What can government leaders do now to prepare for longer-term changes?

We’re shifting from digital service delivery as a supporting mechanism to the primary one. Governments must build a solid, secure platform they can evolve over time and scale as needs change. Incorporating emerging technologies like 5G, edge compute and sensors will make the experience for remote workers seamless, no matter where their daily journey takes them. It will also increase visibility and automation to make physical government spaces safer and more efficient. Because of the pandemic, all these things have been shown to be possible. Now we need to accelerate them.
Trust Fall
Government’s core competence is ultimately a matter of trust — just ask anyone living through the pandemic.

As we look around our COVID-informed world, things look familiar but not normal. The well-worn social distance reminders look like they have always been there, as do signs about wearing masks. We approach each other on sidewalks with the hesitancy and awkwardness of a first date: How close is too close? It all reminds us that, for all their shortcomings, Zoom meetings are comparatively stress free, even if our cameras have given others a deeper look into our private lives than we would have imagined 18 months ago. As much as we want it, there is no normal to get back to. Chalk it up as the great lesson of year one of the COVID-19 era.

Amid the urgency of the moment, our experience with government has changed too. Public service announcements detail public health updates and whether and how businesses, schools and houses of worship are to conduct themselves. Public agencies have worked to uphold the promises made by elected officials while keeping essential services running. We saw what worked and where public institutions came up short. The future in the “after times” is fraught but not without opportunity. Those may be best seen through the lens of core competencies, first work, the need for which was underscored during the first year of the pandemic. And then there is the inconvenient truth that you cannot outsource a problem.

President and Co-Director Phil Bertolini says the work of doing those things well means building capacity to make it all possible: modernization, consolidation, movement of permissions and money, the widescale, secure and trustworthy delivery of services running. We saw what worked and didn’t work, the need for which was underscored during the first year of the pandemic. And then there is the inconvenient truth that just because an organization is supposed to do something doesn’t mean it is good at it. Now, faced with sometimes competing demands to pivot, public agencies looked for help where they could find it.

Bertolini’s fellow VP and Co-Director Teri Takai said that in her time as CIO of two large states and the U.S. Department of Defense, she saw a disturbing tendency for the outsourcing tail to wag the core competency dog. She is careful to clarify that outsourcing has its place and private-sector companies have stepped up in large measure to partner in earnest with government agencies.

That said, Takai also insists the hard work around core competencies is not done. “It is essential for government to own those that impact citizens. For the most part, I have great faith in public servants,” she explained. “I worry when they are not in control of those decisions that are not about ROI, margins, revenue, but about making sure that services are equitable, fair and go to those who need them. There can be debate about what those are, which is healthy, but the premise behind the debate — the public good — is at its heart.”

That public good, something that defies being reduced to a balance sheet, and delivering on it goes to what e.Republic’s Deputy Chief Innovation Officer Joe Morris regards as the kernel of government’s core competence: trust. The lack of trust in the last 12 months has manifested itself in vaccine reluctance, an unwillingness to accept election results and taking to the streets in protest. “If community or societal success depends on residents’ perception and experience,” Morris said, “delivering on government’s core competence has never mattered more.”

By Paul W. Taylor
development editor of e.Republic, Government Technology’s parent company.

June 2021 // www.govtech.com
PROTECT THE NETWORK

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For government employees that can’t
don’t
won’t
use mobile authentication

YubiKey: the easy way to 100% MFA

Many state and local government employees can’t, don’t, or won’t use mobile multi-factor authentication (MFA), creating security gaps. YubiKey is a Department of Defense approved, hardware security key that helps state and local governments stop phishing attacks, account takeovers, and achieve 100% MFA. Learn more at: yubico.com/statelocal

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