

# FEDERAL EMPLOYEES NEWS DIGEST

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## Can COVID-driven telework continue to thrive?

By Nathan Abse

**EVEN BEFORE COVID-19** hit, telework already had a solid place in the federal workplace, with about 22% of employees working remotely at least once per week by 2018. Advocates cite telework's reduced commutes, eased traffic, improved environment and less stress for employees and contractors, especially in cities like the national capital area.

Productivity studies also show good results, and agencies can save on office costs thanks to fewer in-house desks and the property and maintenance expenses those entail. Yet, over two decades of telework, there has also been pushback against the practice, usually prompted by top leaders and managers suspicious of its benefits and worried about productivity. In fact, telework was being rolled back at several departments under the Trump administration until the sudden pandemic required emptying most federal workplaces.

Since March, the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders and individual workers' health and childcare concerns quickly pushed telework to unprecedented levels. At least three-quarters of feds are still working remotely, according to the Office of Personnel Management and other sources. With a long history of mostly positive employee responses to telework, it is perhaps not surprising that the current wave is garnering the same high praise



from employees: Recent survey research shows feds embracing the virtual office.

One online survey of nearly 2,000 federal employees (almost all currently teleworking) conducted by Federal News Network found the vast majority of workers are in no hurry to end virtual work. In a scientific poll of over 500 feds recently administered by Eagle Hill Consulting, a fed-focused management consulting firm, 68% of teleworkers reported they wanted to increase virtual work, while only 3% said they wanted to reduce it. Fully 70% said they were more productive as teleworkers than in their traditional workplace.

This week, Nathan Abse interviewed Eagle Hill's David Witkowski, a management consultant who practices at "the intersection of technology and people at work," as he puts it, about changing attitudes toward telework. "Prior to COVID-19, there was a sense that employees had to be physically present to accomplish

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## INSIGHT

BY MIKE CAUSEY

## Buy American ... up to a point

**MY FIRST CAR** was a 1947 Oldsmobile. I was a teenager and had earned \$776 that year working on my uncle's tobacco/cattle farm. The car cost \$150, a good price from another uncle who was a used car dealer. I drove the car until I graduated from high school and sold it (to yet another uncle) for \$75. The car was so big it could today qualify for its own ZIP code. A teenage hot rod it was not, but it ran and I remember it fondly. Moral of the story, if there is one, is have a bunch of good uncles.

After returning from my three-year tobacco farm exile to DC, I had several American cars. Then I got a new VW bug for \$1,600. But when son No. 2 arrived, we went for a Volvo, a superb car that was bigger and safer, though not very good in ice and snow. By child No. 4 (two boys followed by two girls), we had a VW bus, which was great. The kids could be strapped in but couldn't actually reach each other—even with Popsicle sticks. As they aged out, I decided to buy an American car, which I did and



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their work,” Witkowski said about the survey. “Clearly, that isn’t the case. Now, agencies have an unexpected opportunity to fundamentally shift their telework strategy.”

This Q&A with David Witkowski has been edited for length and clarity.

**According to Eagle Hill’s survey results, very few of the people who now telework want to go back to the workplace. Why is that?**

**Witkowski:** I think there at least two primary drivers for this. Look at this result from the point of view of both personal logistics and convenience. This feeling is especially true for folks in the D.C. area, I think. When I lived there, I had to commute literally an hour-plus each way.

So, one of the great benefits of telework—from the standpoint of effective use of your time and productivity—is the massive amount of time saved not commuting, not stuck on Interstate 66 or 495. Just about everyone I know would rather spend an hour more each day either actually working or being with family. On both fronts, it’s a quality of life improvement.

**Telework by feds has more than doubled due to the pandemic. Are health concerns the main motivator?**

**Witkowski:** There have been a number of surveys, including ours, that ask people how safe they feel about going back to the workplace, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Right now, looking at the data—especially with the surges in infection we now see in, for example, Florida, Texas and Arizona—many people see that we may have reopened too generally or too early.

The coronavirus is surging. That’s a fact. Myself, I have a high-risk person at home. I do not want to go out and risk bringing the infection home. The outcome would be very bad. Many others are in a similar situation. Now, on another point, if you ask supervisors if they feel they are doing all they can in the current situation, many give an interesting answer.

**What did the supervisors say about telework?**

**Witkowski:** Many supervisors replied, when asked about themselves and their efforts regarding telework, that they could do a better job—on transparency, communications and giving direction to their employees. I think this is just a remarkable answer because that’s supervisors being very self-aware. They’re saying, “Hey, my employees are expecting even more of me—there’s an implication that I should do more.” There’s a recognition along the lines of, “I’m not communicating as much as I should.” They see there’s a better path to go down, to be more transparent and engaged with the workforce, even in this remote work situation.

I think this kind of recognition, which you see in the survey results, says a lot about the quality of the federal workforce’s supervisors.

is less impetus to go back into traditional workplaces when it is so clear that people can work just as well remotely.

**Now COVID-19 is pushing agencies toward remote work, but there’s a long history of federal telework, with support going back and forth, right?**

**Witkowski:** Yes. Telework has been on a total roller coaster ride—with major ups and downs over the years. The first telework-specific law, encouraging telework in the federal workforce, came in 2001. That law directed agencies to investigate if wider use of telework would be possible. Since then, there have been 19 years of different legislation and actions on telework, going back and forth on supporting it, depending on the disposition of each administration and Congress.

Looking back, sometimes the tide turned for and sometimes against telework—sometimes very quickly. For

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**What’s your experience with telework in the federal workplace?**

**Witkowski:** I worked on telework policy for the federal government about a decade ago. Things have changed a lot. Back then, many more supervisors and managers often held a lot more skepticism about whether employees could be trusted to just get the work done in a telework situation. Many people just weren’t sure that the federal government or its workplaces had the technology or skills to work remotely—to collaborate well, to carry out the mission. But nowadays, what just about everyone sees is that people can be productive—they can do good work, they can help their agency to carry out the mission—even while teleworking. With this in documented evidence, there

instance, in 2010, there was a huge push for telework. But, then, suddenly the tide turned against it. That anti-telework push followed the private sector’s moves. In 2012, tech company Yahoo!’s then-CEO Marissa Mayer turned against telework—with ripple effects in the private and public sector.

In truth, back then telework just wasn’t as effective, partly due to technological hurdles, as leadership had hoped it would be. But, even now, in the federal government that’s still a huge issue—aging technology. For instance, I was in Portland, Ore., meeting with a physician for the Department of Veterans Affairs, discussing telework. He told me that when he tried to retrieve, say, a necessary document online,

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it could take five minutes—per page! Not good. So, infrastructure often just hasn't been good enough at many agencies.

***So, impediments to federal telework has come not just from managers' lack of trust in employees but also from understanding that technology couldn't rise to the task?***

**Witkowski:** Yes. But I think all that's finally really changing now. For instance, with 5G technology coming out—very soon—it's going to change everything, radically. Like, with the newest iPhone due out this fall with 5G, the technology will be about 100 times faster than a home cable or fiber-optic connection. Telework, finally, is getting progressively easier to actually implement.

***Bottom line then—with powerful new technologies and COVID-19 driving telework, will fed telework will be hard to slow?***

**Witkowski:** Well, actually, there are multiple inputs into how well telework performs—so, it's not just that the technology must be in place. That's important, but there are four major inputs that must be considered, which can help or hinder telework.

First, there's technology, and whether that's up to speed. Second, there's the law, and the policy that follows—and related to this is how the unions interact, their requirements, with management and agency general counsels, about these policies. Third, there is the nature of the work being considered for telework—for instance, some work can be done readily as telework and other work cannot. Like, the specific work of the Oregon VA physician I mentioned—that just can't be done as telework. Fourth, there are the attitudes and behaviors of managers, supervisors and employees, toward telework.

On that last point, in our survey we can see that there is a closing gap toward more trust. That is, there's more trust from the workforce, in that the employees think their agency can pull off telework

successfully. That attitude cuts the other way, too. Supervisors are trusting their employees, and they report a real uptick in believing both they and their employees can do it. If you ask people in general, "Do you think your agency can work in a telework environment?" Now 88%, in our research, say "yes."

***So, the tide is actually turning for more telework?***

**Witkowski:** Yes. In my opinion, soon we will see a successful vaccine come out—in the coming months, I believe. And, at that point, as people perceive that it's safe to go back into an office environment, it still just won't be business as usual, with everyone suddenly headed back to the office. Instead, I think we'll see people saying, "Yes, I can go into the office. But I want an alternative arrangement where I come in two or however many days a week—not all the time—or something where I do a lot more virtual work." The point is now there is both the technology and the "trust culture" for more agencies to do much more telework.

***Do you think fewer people will spend time in the office?***

**Witkowski:** I think that there will be an evolution in that direction. Why? Again, several factors. First, there's the sheer cost to the agencies of office space. One of the key forces involved in pushing telework many years ago was the already high cost of real estate—especially in the D.C. area. That's when the idea of "hoteling" and "hot desks" really got moving toward a situation where not every employee would come in to the office every day; instead, they would rotate through at different times.

I think this and related concepts will continue to expand under a new normal of more telework. Over time, we'll be moving toward far more people not coming in to the office. In my work, not on federal projects but on advising banking and other businesses, you see so many people work together from far-flung time zones—and it's not practical to meet in person much of the time. Already there

you see just an enormous amount of this kind of full-on telework.

***And telework will depend on the kind of jobs feds have?***

**Witkowski:** That's right. Before I was a consultant I was a microbiologist, and that kind of work would not have been very practical to take home. You just have to do most of it at the lab, and you're not going to take bacteria home with you. But with a lot of knowledge work—things like mission support, finance management, IT, legal, acquisition, a lot of which is going on in the federal government—a lot of that can be done at home. Meanwhile, law enforcement and much of health care work has to be done face to face, at least until we have better telemedicine. Yes, much of that has to be done in person, until technology evolves.

***What will happen to the traditional federal workplace and its concrete, chrome and glass office buildings?***

**Witkowski:** It's a good question. Technology is driving a lot of change. Just think of artificial intelligence, cloud and cybersecurity—these were not the top topics just five or 10 years ago. Now they are coming into reality. Practically everyone has Siri or Alexa—virtual assistants—on their phones and computers at home. Across our lives and work, we're going to see more and more artificial intelligence and process robotics. The nature of our work, specifically, is going to change completely the next five or 10 years. That means the nature of working collaboratively is going to change profoundly, too. How are the agencies preparing for that? We'll see. As for the federal government's huge workplace buildings? Hey, we don't know.

***Are telework attitudes being driven by consumer apps, like Siri and Alexa and FaceTime?***

**Witkowski:** Yes. If you ask me the two biggest factors going into more telework, here they are: First, the technology is fast becoming more reliable and

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## NEWS BRIEFS

### **SURGE OF WORKERS' COMP CLAIMS COULD IMPACT PROCESSING**

**EFFECTS OF THE** COVID-19 pandemic are expected to slow claims processing at the Division of Federal Employees' Compensation (DFEC), according to a July 6 [audit](#) of the Office of Workers' Compensation Programs by the Labor Department's Office of Inspector General.

As of June 16, DFEC had received 2,866 COVID-19 claims, including 48 death claims, and paid out approximately \$30,000 in medical benefits and compensation. The division estimates it will receive 6,000 COVID claims through Aug. 4, straining resources and delaying claims processing.

To prepare to meet these challenges, DFEC developed a contingency plan, issued new procedures for handling COVID-19 claims and created a COVID-19 task force to oversee claims development and adjudication.

establishes a diagnosis of COVID-19, such as a positive COVID-19 test result," the report said. COVID-related claims filed by employees in positions not considered high-risk will be treated the same as all other FECA claims, DFEC said, meaning claimants must provide evidence that the disease was employment-related.

### **HOUSE MEMBERS URGE 3% PAY RAISE FOR CIVILIAN FEDS**

**A WEEK AFTER** House Appropriators moved a funding bill that included a 1% pay raise for federal workers, a bipartisan group of lawmakers is pushing for parity between the civilian workforce and members of the military.

Ten members of the House, led by Rep. Gerry Connolly (D-Va.), sent a letter to Appropriations Chairwoman Nita Lowey (D-N.Y.) and Ranking Member Kay Granger (R-Texas), along with the chairman and ranking member of the Financial Services and General Government Appropriations Subcommittee, asking them to revise the Financial Services and General

Connolly and his colleagues touted the civilian workforce's resiliency during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The federal civilian workforce is comprised of dedicated individuals who have demonstrated their critical value to this nation each day throughout this pandemic. During this global crisis, our federal government never shut down... This year, in particular, our federal civilian workforce has served this nation at the time when services were most needed."

On Feb. 10 of this year, the White House announced in its budget request that it would request a 1 percent pay raise while also increasing the contribution expected from federal retirees.

### **REOPENING PLANS ENDANGER NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION, SENATORS SAY**

**SENATORS FROM MARYLAND** and Virginia have voiced their opposition to the federal government's plan to require agency workers in the National Capital Region to return to their workplaces.

In a letter to Office of Personnel Management Director Michael Rigas and Office of Management and Budget acting Director Russell Vought, the lawmakers advocated for clearer guidelines to better protect federal workers and an extension of agency telework programs. The July 9 letter was sent by Sens. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.), Benjamin Cardin (D-Md.), Mark Warner (D-Va.) and Tim Kaine (D-Va.).

With the number of cases climbing nationally and many local workers still without access to childcare, "ordering these workers back into the office makes it needlessly harder for them to balance work and family obligations during the pandemic," the lawmakers said.

The Maryland, Virginia and District of Columbia governments, the senators reminded the agency heads, are continuing their telework policies and limiting office capacity for public-sector workers.

Plus, they said, the Opening Up America

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DFEC plans to dedicate two Medical Benefit Examiner teams—reassigning two of four examiner units focusing on opioid cases—to COVID-19 claims to ensure greater consistency and oversight.

To streamline processing for COVID-infected federal employees in high-risk positions, DFEC will accept that the exposure to the virus "was proximately caused by the nature of the employment and will only require medical evidence that

Government appropriations bill to match the 3% raise the National Defense Authorization Act current mandates for military personnel.

"As in previous years, we support the biggest pay increase possible for our military members," the legislators wrote. "We also want to note that with very few exceptions Congress has maintained pay parity with respect to pay raises for military and civilian federal employees."

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[guidance](#), which only supports maximum telework for high-risk workers, may erase the progress agencies have made combating the virus.

“Your current guidance is endangering the health and safety of federal workers and everyone in our region. And since 85 percent of federal employees work outside of our region, it endangers the entire country,” the lawmakers said.

The federal government, they said, should “issue clearer guidance directing agencies to continue maximizing telework throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.”

### BOOSTING VA PAY IS KEY TO RETENTION, WILKIE SAYS

THE DEPARTMENT OF Veterans Affairs wants to pay medical workers more competitive salaries to better attract and retain them during the pandemic, VA Secretary

Robert Wilkie said, and Congress just gave the agency more authority to do it.

“We have to attract doctors and nurses who we are competing with the private sector on,” he said, speaking at a recent Defense Writers Group virtual event. “We’ve thrown away the book on hiring.

**But pay flexibility is only part of the issue. Wilkie said shortening the hiring process, which can often take a year or more, has also been important to improving the VA’s operations.**

In the last seven weeks we’ve hired over 18,000 [providers]; 90% of those are permanent. Almost 5,000 are nurses.”

Wilkie said he was happy about the pace of hiring, but “we have to be realistic. There are certain medical skills we can’t attract unless we have that ability to compensate those professionals.”

The newly passed law allows the VA secretary to lift salary caps for certain high-level employees and officials—including qualified physicians, dentists, clinicians, medical and pharmacy directors—beyond the basic pay scale. Certain executive positions, such as the VA’s deputy undersecretary for health, are also covered in the law.

But pay flexibility is only part of the issue. Wilkie said shortening the hiring process, which can often take a year or more, has also been important to improving the VA’s operations.

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## Thrift Savings Plan Share Prices

Funds	July 15	Month Ago	Year Ago
G Fund	16.4519	16.4426	16.2113
F Fund	21.0574	20.8358	19.2003
C Fund	47.6702	46.1115	43.7008
S Fund	55.2910	53.3428	53.2473
I Fund	30.4751	29.4106	30.6065
<b>Lifecycle Funds</b>			
L Income	21.3513	21.1666	20.6926
L 2025	10.2067	—	—
L 2030	34.7862	34.0373	33.2130
L 2035	10.2723	—	—
L 2040	38.2174	37.2440	36.3599
L 2045	10.3170	—	—
L 2050	22.2736	21.6317	21.1470
L 2055	10.4025	—	—
L 2060	10.4026	—	—
L 2065	10.4027	—	—

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Staffing shortages at the VA are not limited to medical personal, however. In 2019, 40% of VA hospitals suffered from shortages of housekeeping staff, with more than 2,000 positions unfilled, according to a March 26 inspector general's [report](#) of the Veteran's Health Administration's COVID-19 screening processes and pandemic readiness.

VA facilities are also working with fewer policing staff, with 65 facilities calling it a "severe occupational shortage," the report said, "due to training, recruitment, and retention challenges, as well as the additional strain caused by the need for additional police presence for COVID-19-related screenings."

In its response, VHA said it is actively recruiting permanent and temporary employees for both clinical non-clinical positions and is "particularly interested in rapid re-employment of retired VA clinicians and Federal health care providers." The agency said that the Office of Personnel Management had recently granted the VA emergency authority to use dual compensation waivers to ensure that recently retired employees can be rehired with no loss to their retirement annuities.

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## HOUSE FY21 FUNDING BILL BLOCKS OPM-GSA MERGER AND EMPOWERS UNIONS

**THE HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS** Committee's Financial Services and General Government Subcommittee voted to pass its Fiscal Year 2021 appropriations [bill](#) that would codify language to block merging the Office of Personnel Management and General Services Administration—an administration goal that has drawn opposition from congressional Democratic leaders.

Services Administration or to the Office of Management and Budget," the bill states.

Despite legal prohibitions, the White House has pressed on with its efforts to initiate the reorganization. GSA, in its budget request for the upcoming fiscal year, included budget plans for OPM.

The Financial Services and General Government appropriations bill also seeks to protect federal-sector unions by mandating that such organizations be allowed to access facility space and use official time while conducting union business.

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## The Financial Services and General Government appropriations bill also seeks to protect federal-sector unions by mandating that such organizations be allowed to access facility space and use official time while conducting union business.

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"None of the funds made available by this or any other Act may be obligated or expended to reorganize or transfer any function or authority of the Office of Personnel Management to the General

As currently written, the bill would also stop agencies from implementing any collective bargaining agreements that were not "mutually and voluntarily agreed to by all parties" dating back to April 30, 2019. ■

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continue to do. Up to a point.

Most of my cars were great deals from Avis or Hertz, though the rental companies made a big profit. The cars were well maintained: good AC, good heaters, low mileage—a win-win for all. And good for the US of A too.

After driving each for a while, I gave them to my then-adult kids and got a new (as in used) replacement from Avis or Hertz. My third new car was a Jeep convertible that we all loved. We took it on three-week trips from the East to the West coast. It ran great in winters in DC which, as a river town, means you are always driving in ice and snow with hotshots who say they've driven through winters in Boston, Albany and Chicago, but somehow can't navigate

DC streets in the snow. There are lots of diplomats who drive like they have immunity (because they do) and tourists who are gawking and baffled by our many traffic circles.

But the Jeep was maybe my all-time favorite car—it lasted for decades. Son No. 2 took it to college, returned with it. Finally, our Jeep went to an enterprising 14-year-old neighbor kid who rebuilt it.

The other day, The Washington Post ran a column (my job for many years) thumping people like me for letting hometown newspapers die because of declining circulation. No readers, the columnist said, means no ads, no money, no newspaper—although there are many other reasons. I didn't take it personally, because I subscribe. And while his preachy tone got to me, I got

it—support the home team. Then I saw the columnist driving a Japanese car!

Now, maybe that car was made in whole or part in Kentucky or Ohio, but he still wants me, you, all of us, to subscribe to our hometown newspaper, but he drives a car where most of the profits (I assume) don't stay in the U.S.A. Just saying.

I'm sometimes hard on newspaper columnists because I wrote columns for the Post for 31 years. I got irked one time when a colleague blasted people sending their kids to private schools for rich kids rather than to the local school where he expected his neighbors to send their less-gifted kids. He was later interviewed on a national TV show about advocating for neighborhood schools while sending his own kids across town

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stable. Second, people's cultural trust and other attitudes toward telework have improved dramatically—partly because of the things you mention in their home lives. And when you see COVID has forced so many of us into telework—and when people see people teleworking and the work getting done—that dramatically improves everyone's trust even more.

**How is the federal workforce holding up for now, in the face of—for many feds—such a quick turn to telework?**

**Witkowski:** For many, very well.

I'd like to give you an example. I recently worked with the Department of the Air Force. They had to change to virtual very, very suddenly in the COVID emergency. I mean, in my example, it went from everyone on-base, then suddenly to everybody sitting six-feet apart then suddenly, "do not come to the base unless you are military police or have a critical position." Even the top officers still on-base and close to each other

are using video conferencing and other technology—not meeting in person—as they try to get through this and maintain social distancing.

It's all about how do we telework here. How do we collaborate effectively without sitting in front of computers 12 hours a day? How do we make sure we are fulfilling the agency mission? And, as our survey has shown, governmentwide, about half of those surveyed report that they are coping with their job changing, and then another half feel some lack of clarity on how to remain successful in this new mode.

My point here is that these problems are fairly easy to fix, with the right supervisory input—spending more time on the team, setting a common vision and individual goals. The work is still getting done, and the problems are readily fixed. Moving into more telework can be difficult, but supervisors can fix problems by engaging their people—whether by text, phone, email, video teleconference. If they take the time, these problems can be dealt with effectively while doing telework. ■

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to a (then-\$40,000 per year) private school, and he explained that while he supports public schools for others: "When it's your own kid, you just want what's best for them!" Oh, okay. Your kid, your situation, is different, right? Gotcha.

Living in a place like D.C., where famous, influential people don't always practice what they preach, keeps the old juices flowing. My motto is: You've got to laugh at this stuff, or else you will cry and become bitter over it.

Anyhow, two years ago—after a string of modest Chevy rentals—I decided to return to my all-American roots. I had considered a Subaru

(based on what I had seen and read about them) but wanted to stay American. So I passed up a good deal at an excellent dealer near me and went to a Jeep dealer further away who immediately ripped me off for a couple thousand bucks and whose service is not so hot. But at least I'd returned to basics—Jeep—born in the USA in 1941. I bought the suburban model, not the traditional Jeep. It cost me more than was promised, and it's the wrong color. But it's still my soulmate with many wonderful memories. USA! USA!

When I took possession, the dealer handed me the weird electronic key and I got in. First thing I saw on the door panel: MADE IN ITALY. ■

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