



WORK FROM HOME (WFH): NEW NORM FOR MUNICIPAL WORKERS

The 2020 Coronavirus pandemic surprised most people in the world in March 2020. This includes leaders at City Hall and other municipal and local government organizations.

And although City Hall and other government offices had to close their doors to prevent the spread of the virus, public services had to continue to be carried out. Thus, municipal employees were willing participants in the WFH (work from home) directives from City Hall and other government offices. I say “willing” participants because many surveys say 80% of employees have enjoyed being able to see their family during the day now that they work from home. Nevertheless, 66% of workers prefer working in the office or workplace over working from home.

Of course not all municipal office workers are allowed or able to work from home. In fact, during the last decade, the *education level of the worker* plays a large part in determining whether an employee is a good candidate to work form home. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics did a survey in 2010 that showed that employees with a “bachelor’s degree and higher” were over three times as likely to be working form home compared to workers with “less than a high school diploma”.

Personally, I have found that regardless of education level, those of you who are most organized, can work independently “without supervision”, and especially those of you who are good communicators, you are the strongest candidates to be allowed the opportunity to WFH as a telecommuter remote worker municipal employee.

In Today’s CitySpeak blog, podcast, and video post we will discuss six areas that local government leaders can consider to decide to maintain or expand WFH options for their employees after Coronavirus pandemic subsidies:

1. WFH – Think of the Possibilities.
2. WFH – Think of the Productivity.
3. WFH – Think of the Risks.
4. WFH – Think “Outside the Box”.
5. WFH – Trust Systems and Internal Controls.
6. WFH – Opportunity for Humans to Compete with AI & Robots.

WFH – THINK OF THE POSSIBILITIES

As a municipal employee at City Hall for 30 years, I can honestly say that local government organizations are significantly more “bureaucratic” than private businesses. The “red tape” that all stakeholders must go through, including paperwork and documentation, does not always add value to the business processes of the organization, much less the mission statement or vision of the community that it serves.

In prior CitySpeak podcasts, we've talked about how the goals of efficiency and customer service are sometimes subordinated to the individual goals of self-preservation. There are many instances where these self-preservation goals results in municipal employees defaulting to the "it's the way we've always done it here" mantra that perpetuates unnecessary bureaucracy and red tape without adding much if any value to the core values of the municipal organization.

With the Coronavirus pandemic and the economic impacts from loss of tax revenues, this has created huge opportunities for local government managers to reassess their policies and procedures, as well as redesign and implement better "systems" to provide an acceptable level of customer service with the existing human and capital resources available to the organization.

Municipal employees and management should explore the possibilities of using WFH policies, procedures, and systems to not only allow their organizations "do more with less", but also to improve the business processes to optimize efficiency, custom service standards, stakeholder satisfaction, and the efficiency and productivity in delivering the general government services that ensure the efficient delivery of municipal services.

WFH – THINK OF THE PRODUCTIVITY

The WFH possibilities exist mostly in the general government services activities at City Hall and other municipal organizations. General government services are the activities that ensure the efficient (or inefficient) delivery of municipal services to the communities they serve.

At the risk of having tomatoes thrown at me, but I will ask the comical question, how many municipal employees does it take to change a light bulb?

Of course I'm joking. Most municipal employees work hard and are productive in doing their jobs. However, there is always room for improvement. I know the constraints and opportunities in municipal government.

Don't forget I was a municipal employee for 30 years working at offices at City Hall and Special Districts. I had to work through various discussions during those three decades during which my job, and the job of staff in my departments, were put under scrutiny.

Every few years, when we went through "costing government service" exercises, especially when updating our Fee & Charge studies, the services of my job and departments was put under a microscope. The goal was to analyze the "cost of services" that I and other department staff delivered, and to see to what extent our jobs were "user fee supported". This analysis also showed what part of my job was paid for through user fees and how much was supported ("subsidized") through local taxes.

We looked at many municipal services, fee supported or not as part of the budget process. Here is just a partial list of activities and services we costed out using information from the budget:

- Conducting recruitments.
- Processing building permits.
- Processing plan checks
- Issuing a check.
- Issuing a purchase order.

- Completing the annual audit.
- Preparing the budget.
- City Clerk agenda packet processing.
- City Clerk public records requests.
- Public Works utility services.

The focus was on looking at the performance budgeting system to track not only the resources appropriated to a department, but also what the money was used for, down to the cost of each activity or service level.

I didn't like it much then, but in retrospect, I see now that the interests of our citizens, businesses, and other stakeholders should come before our personal focus on self-preservation or job autonomy. Our focus as municipal employees should always be on advancing accountability and transparency as a fundamental core value in our work as municipal employees.

The administrative and fiscal exercise to look at the cost of delivering municipal services achieved so much more than just greater cost recovery from user fees. It also showed us where we could improve productivity and efficiency of how we delivered public services.

Of course we cannot think about the "rewards" of greater efficiency and productivity without thinking of the "risks" of WFH opportunities on the effectiveness of our organization's business processes.

WFH – THINK OF THE RISKS

Yes, there are risks from allowing more municipal employees to WFH. What are they?

There are a variety of disadvantages that municipal managers are concerned about, but here are the top 7 disadvantages Hubstaff Blog cited almost three years ago:

1. A lack of community and differences in culture.
2. Difficult or lacking communication.
3. Low reliability and retention.
4. Difficult to manage and maintain accountability.
5. Issues with payment and logistics.
6. Loss of productivity.
7. Security concerns.

Of the 7 disadvantages stated above, local governments are likely most concerned about #4-7. Yet during this pandemic, municipalities have had little choice but to send some employees to work from home. There is little in the way of public administration literature to quantify the true impact of the above listed disadvantages, especially in the area of accountability, productivity, and security concerns.

Watch for academia to publish studies on this special topic as WFH continues as a viable solution to help stop the spread of the Coronavirus.

The above 7 concerns must be considered to maintain the public trust, however, with proper implementation of administrative / financial systems and internal controls, managers can work smarter to develop policies that mitigate the risks of abuse.

WFH – TRUST SYSTEMS AND INTERNAL CONTROLS

During the last 8 months, municipal organizations have been faced with mandatory WFH initiatives to get municipal employees out of the office and still provide general government services to their organizations and communities.

This has been especially possible as many municipalities have implemented “cloud-based” ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) systems to provide general government services in their organizations.

Using existing ERP systems that provide the administrative and financial “infrastructure” for local governments, especially those modified to allow WFH capabilities during Coronavirus, City Managers and other local government leaders can have greater trust that these can be used “remotely” to address #4-#7 in the above list of WFH disadvantages and concerns.

In the Finance Department where the “money jobs” exist, municipal finance officers are very used to continually refining their internal controls to ensure items #4 and #7 above are mitigated of the risk exposure. During the annual audit period of August through December, City and local government organizations have their internal controls “tested” by their independent auditors.

The independent auditors follow the AICPA Statement on Auditing Standards (SAS) No. 78 to report on the organization’s effectiveness with internal controls as follows: **SAS No. 78** is “a process--effected by an entity’s board of directors, management, and other personnel—designed to provide reasonable assurance regarding the achievement of objectives in the following categories: a)reliability of financial reporting, b)effectiveness and efficiency of operations, and c)compliance with applicable laws and regulations”.

So with an effective system, especially the ERP system, and sound framework of internal controls, municipal employees from City Hall and other local government organizations, can mitigate the risks and disadvantages when allowing general government services to be performed remotely via WFH initiatives.

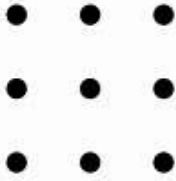
The entire notion of WFH is a novel idea caused by the novel Coronavirus. This innovation is now an urgent need to be considered, especially by City Managers, General Managers, and other municipal leaders who think “outside the box” to facilitate innovative approaches to “do more with less” while providing an acceptable level of customer services to the customers and stakeholders of the organization and the community it serves.

WFH – THINK “OUTSIDE THE BOX”

Thinking outside the box is an adage that has become cliché to many, yet it is powerful as ever. Every municipal organization likely carries out management retreats at least annually. Creativity and innovation should be a part of the brainstorming exercises. Further, if our municipality has gone through this exercise in the past, why not dust them off instead of leaving them gathering dust in some book shelf at City Hall or other government office.

There are so many simple and fun games that can be used to show the value of creativity brainstorming exercises.

Thinking Outside the Box “Game”



Think “outside the box” to solve this problem. You need to join all nine dots by drawing no more than 4 straight lines. The straight lines must be continuous, i.e., ***you must not lift your pen from the paper once you start drawing.*** Think outside the box. 😊

Test your creative thinking ability by NOT looking up the answer. This 9-dot “thinking outside the box” problem is just one example how looking at problems differently can solve a problem.

As we have said many times, City Managers and General Managers do not lead their municipal organizations to just “deliver services”. No, they lead their organizations to “create solutions” to municipal issues that require innovation and to think “outside the box”.

Thinking outside the box (also thinking out of the box or thinking beyond the box and, especially in Australia, thinking outside the square) is a metaphor that means to think differently, unconventionally, or from a new perspective. This phrase often refers to novel or creative thinking. The term is thought to have derived from management consultants in the 1970s and 1980s challenging their clients to solve the “nine dots” puzzle, whose solution requires some lateral thinking. This phrase can also be found commonly in dance, as encouragement to move creatively, beyond simple, geometric box steps and their basic variations, to literally step outside the box into more complex patterns of expression.

Are there any advantages to municipal employees as a group from thinking outside the box? I believe there are, and municipal leaders can be proactive to create a professional culture that challenges employees to obligate themselves to success.

The greatest threat to municipal employee’s jobs in the next 5 to 10 years is A.I. (artificial intelligence) and robots!

WFH – OPPORTUNITY FOR HUMANS TO COMPETE WITH A.I. AND ROBOTS

As I wrote in a prior CitySpeak blog article, [“When Robots Get Physical with Humans”](#), I highlight the impacts technology, automation, and A.I. and robots will have on a large percentage of the jobs currently performed by local government employees.

You can accuse me of suffering from a bad case of the “cyberphobia” illness, but you only have to look at the colossal impact that technology and automation has caused during the last 20 years. And with the exponential technological gains that A.I. is making in the year 2020, it is not far fetched to believe that municipal employees who do not train and prepare to compete with A.I. and computer automation during the coming years will find their jobs lost before they retire.

A.I. expert Kai Fu Lee said in Fortune.com magazine that he believes, “40% of the world’s jobs will be replaced in the next 15 years by robots capable of automating tasks”. This number could be higher or lower depending on the job classification of each organization.

So what I'm saying to all of you municipal employees, be like the tough worker "Real John Henry" who showed the power of the human spirit in beating the machine and technology with his hard work.

There's a saying that what doesn't kill us makes us stronger.

Make no mistake about it, change happens. And the high tech impacts of A.I. and robotics will continue to have an impact on the jobs of municipal employees because of the City budget deficits projected in many organizations, largely driven by public employee pensions and declining tax revenues.

CONCLUSION

If this 2020 Coronavirus recession delays the economic recovery, your municipal organizations will be in a stronger position to the extent you have a good WFH program that integrates with your municipality's ERP system and framework of internal controls.

So as we conclude, *I challenge municipal employees* to obligate themselves to success against inefficiency and work proactively to work smarter to beat out A.I. and robots.

Train and educate yourself to improve your organizational and communication skills so your supervisors can have full trust and confidence in your ability to work productively, efficiently, while preserving the integrity of ERP systems and protecting the public trust afforded to you as your WFH.

I also challenge municipal managers to think of the possibilities and productivity gains from allowing your most organized employees to WFH. If you think outside the box and trust your system of internal controls, you can mitigate the calculated risks of WFH policies down a tolerable level.

The rewards to your municipal organization, your employees, and all stakeholders of your community are great!

This is John Herrera from MuniTemps, thanking you for joining me for today's CitySpeak blog, podcast, and video.

See you next time! Bye!