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If Telework Becomes Permanent, ELEC is Ready to Implement It

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Optimistically, state government soon will resume in-person operations that existed prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020.

Public employees again will be back in the office five days per week, and they will be ready to deliver services face-to-face to the public when necessary.

While this is my personal preference, the future is clouded by a virus that seems to have no end and a society that may well be moving toward a new model for work itself.

Before the Omicron virus strain began spreading throughout New Jersey, State government employees had returned to the office five days per week on November 29, 2021.

As the latest variant spread like wildfire, Governor Murphy felt compelled to return to the hybrid work schedule, which at ELEC requires two days a week in the office.

The Governor initially extended it until January 9, 2022, then moved the date back again to January 18, 2022, the day following the Martin Luther King holiday.

Recognizing that the nature of work may change even if the virus runs its course, ELEC management last year began preparing a long-range plan for teleworking should the State move in that direction in the future.

The objective was to establish a plan that would ensure that the standard of service historically provided by the Commission would continue if remote working became a fixture of state government in the future.

This long-range plan was completed in 2021. It identified services able to be performed remotely without any loss of service to the public while highlighting functions best provided in person.

Cyber-security issues as well as the cost of new technology, including a modernized phone system, were considered.

A modernized phone system would allow our office-based receptionists to connect directly to a staff person working at home. By not requiring the member of the public to wait for a return call, this would offer greater convenience.

Though it is hard to imagine government switching to a permanent teleworking model, the unpredictable pattern of the Covid virus, the way the private sector has been moving toward a new work paradigm, the way that employers and employees have grown accustomed to working remotely, and the adjustments made by State government toward teleworking during the pandemic, all point to a future of an altered work environment.

Even before COVID-19 arrived, the Commission had gradually made most of its services available online during the past two decades by taking advantage of Internet-based technology. So have other government agencies.

Long past were the days when candidates and lobbyists filed reports in person or when members of the public and press personally visited the Commission's offices to view reports.

Members of the press, for example, used to be regular visitors to the Commission's public room. As more and more reports became available online, that practice ended. Now, they visit ELEC offices mainly to attend agency meetings or to do in-person interviews.

ELEC's website (www.elec.nj.gov/) enables the public to file reports electronically, take online training webinars, attend virtual Commission meetings (when required), search political contributions, or view and download reports filed by candidates, political parties, PACs, independent spending committees, lobbyists, public contractors, and professional fundraisers.

ELEC by embracing technological advances has largely made it unnecessary for members of the public and media to physically visit the agency's office.

The key question looming now is whether some of those same advances should be used to let employees operate from home part-time after the virus threat ebbs.

Even in the private sector, which has largely paved the way for a telework future, there are differences of opinion as to the efficacy of remote work.

In assessing telework, J.P. Morgan Chief Executive Jamie Dimon remarked at a virtual conference in September: “We’ve seen productivity drop in certain jobs and alienation go up in certain things,”

On the other hand, Jaron Campell, H.S.B.C.’s head of corporate banking, said “staffers prefer the flexibility, and the arrangement held up well during the busy year on Wall Street.”

With the private sector in disagreement, it is anyone’s guess as to the future direction of how work is done, particularly in government.

Personally, I believe government and politics require some personal interactions to be effective. It is difficult to think of government operating on an entirely impersonal, virtual model. This applies to interactions with staff as well as the public.

I tend to agree with the sentiments of Eric Adams, the new Mayor of New York City, who said “You can’t run New York City from home.”

Despite his sentiment and mine, preparing for either eventuality is the most realistic course.

Because management foresaw and embraced inevitable change, recognized the benefits of technological innovation to public service and progress, and, through its Telework Report, laid the foundation for potential shifts in the nature of how work is performed, the Commission is well positioned to assume the challenges of a permanent telework initiative if one becomes necessary.

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The opinions presented here are his own and not necessarily those of the commission.