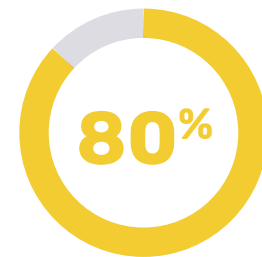# EAGLE HILL

Riding the Teleworking Wave:

What Federal employees say about teleworking amid the pandemic

A new survey shows that nearly **80 percent** of federal employees who teleworked during the pandemic say it has increased their dedication to the mission.

80%

CAN FEDERAL AGENCIES BUILD ON THE MOMENTUM?

After years of agencies nibbling around the edges of telework, COVID-19 forced the issue. Federal agencies embraced telework out of necessity. Just two years ago, less than a quarter of federal workers worked from home. During the pandemic, that number surged to three quarters. But now that we have momentum, what will it take to make telework stick into the future—and be a winning proposition for agencies, their employees, and the people they serve?

To get at these answers, EHC surveyed a random sample of over 500 federal employees across the United States in June 2020. We wanted to know how employees and supervisors feel about their teleworking experience amid COVID-19; how much trust do stakeholders have in telework today; the opportunities and challenges; and what changes need to happen to keep telework a viable proposition after the pandemic.

A SEA CHANGE WITH STAYING POWER

We have strong indications that telework will not roll back to pre-pandemic levels. As employees return to government offices, they will require more space per person. Social distancing requirements should factor into how offices are configured for months to come. And long after mandates for extra space expire, we can expect people to feel much less comfortable working elbow-to-elbow with their peers than they did pre-pandemic. Unsurprisingly, a majority (68 percent) of federal employees want to continue teleworking more than they did before the pandemic, and 88 percent believe that their agencies have the resources to support telework. They're sold on the proposition.

Not that the federal government has any interest in looking backward. Even before COVID-19, the OPM promoted telework as "an important tool for achieving a resilient and results-oriented workforce" and a way to give employees "flexibility in meeting personal and professional responsibilities while ensuring agencies meet critical missions." And in written testimony prepared in July 2020 for the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, Global Workplace Analytics estimated that even half-time telework could yield government savings over $11B per year.

As the US Government continues to make strides in the policy and technology aspects that will enable continued widespread telework, it could surf the present moment to a rosy future. But there's still work to do. Beneath the current wave lie three hazards related to people and culture. Federal agencies need to navigate these three carefully to make the most of the current impetus.

01 THE TELEWORK TRUST GAP

Eagle Hill's survey found that over **80 percent** of federal employees who telework believe their supervisors trust them to get their work done while teleworking. Yet only **62 percent** of federal supervisors say that they trust their direct reports to get their work done while teleworking. This "trust gap" exposes the pitfalls created by government's history of managing by input (hours) rather than by outcome. Many federal managers, it seems, now feel uneasy switching away from their familiar and comfortable, but limited-utility, practices.

Of course, organizational culture weighs heavily on how large of trust gap different government entities will see. Some missions demand extraordinary levels of solidarity and collaboration. Those organizations already have cultures centered on supporting closeness and trust among leadership and their teams. Other cultures, where employees work in more individualistic roles, will likely see much larger gaps in telework trust. For these organizations, we recommend:

Embrace optimism about the benefits of telework.

Federal agencies have to deliberately reshape negative preconceptions about telework. If an organization supports telework, then managers need to get behind it, 100 percent. Attitudes of mistrust that employees really are working from home will unconsciously seep into how managers view, and potentially treat, employees.

Provide training on the benefits of telework and reinforce a positive orientation through communications. For example, hold frequent team calls to maintain transparency and keep employees informed. In addition to providing timely content, these calls can spotlight individual employees' unique experiences of telework, recognize high-performing teleworkers, and focus on the "silver linings" that employees have found through new ways of working.
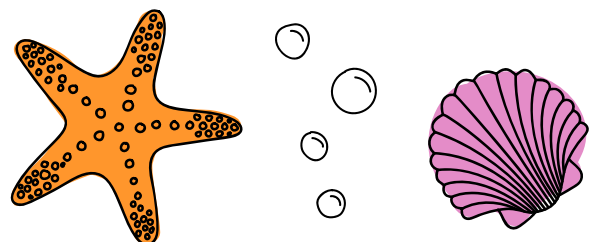
Establish new thinking for the new normal.

Recognize that telework is not just office work planted in a different setting. It is an entirely different model and as such needs careful change management to succeed. With the pandemic accelerating the transition to telework, it's more important than ever to visit and shore up longer-term strategy and implementation plans to get intentional end results. In other words, telework is not an area you want to let grow as it will.

Collaborate with employees on the telework solution. Employees can and should have input into how the model is shaped at the team levels.

Let it go. Micromanagement inhibits the move toward outcome-orientation. Set guidelines for outcomes and then monitor the outcomes, not people's every minute. Remember, it's the business, not the busyness that matters.

Change how you communicate.

Less than half (48 percent) of our survey respondents feel their supervisors are transparent in their communications. Only 35 percent feel their supervisors create opportunities to connect on a personal level. Communication and trust go hand-in-hand, particularly when workers are remote.

Communicate regularly with these two principles in mind: one, transparency (within the bounds of responsibility and ethics, explain truthfully about what you know and what you don't know) and two, authenticity (create opportunities for connection at a personal level). The goal is not so much a barrage of communication, but a change in tenor—one that builds relationships through honesty and empathy.
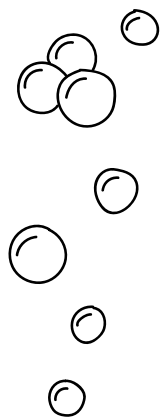
02 BALANCING THE NEEDS OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE GROUP

Eagle Hill's survey shows that individual behaviors and attitudes toward work have improved during teleworking. For example, employees in our survey say they feel...

More motivated	76%
More productive	70%
More accountable	69%

However, respondents also feel less connected **(66 percent)** and less collaborative **(51 percent)** with their peers while teleworking.

Connection has proven implications for employees' well-being at an individual level, increasing personal fulfillment and reducing stress (and burnout). Those factors weigh heavily on organizational performance as well, because connection fuels creativity, teamwork and collaboration.

Telework does not have to mean isolation, but it does mean federal agencies will have to work harder than before to maintain close and supportive cultures. To foster a work culture where telework becomes a win for both individuals and teams, we recommend:

Set team norms on how to work together virtually.

Only 46 percent of our survey respondents say their supervisors set guidelines for how teams should work together through telework. This point again comes down to change management: Iron out all the details in advance, such as how will you coordinate team projects and what are people's preferred methods of interacting remotely.

Prioritize team needs. Create an integrated calendar for the team schedule. Set it with input from members and emphasize that it takes precedence over individual meetings. Project management technology can help with the nuts and bolts of assigning tasks and keeping track of team progress. At Eagle Hill, for example, our teams will have a team project dashboard and then outline each individual's responsibilities vis-à-vis team outcomes.

Emphasize the team, but be considerate of the individual. Telework does not mean "always on." In a respectful work culture, team members must agree to honor the boundaries of the workday. For example, managers should avoid after-hours, off-the-cuff work thoughts sent via text. Work thoughts after hours should be sent properly, via work email.

Share progress on team goals and celebrate when you hit team milestones. Highlighting hard-earned team successes contributes to creating a culture of belonging.

Design virtual interactions to be inclusive.

Continue building team cohesion through regular check-ins. Until it becomes habit, managers should set reminders to connect with team members at certain points in the day.

Encourage small talk to open meetings and during meetings, make sure everyone's voice is heard. One technique for making sure your team members all have a chance to share their thoughts is to use a round robin format, where everyone weighs in on the topic at hand and has equal speaking opportunity. Another tactic is to allow the team to digest content ahead of the meeting so they can order their thoughts prior to the meeting. More introverted employees may especially appreciate this courtesy.

Evolve. Check in with teams frequently about what's working and what's not in the telework dynamic and get confidential feedback from individual members as well. Adopt a flexible approach; parameters can be adjusted just as easily as they are set.

Turn telework to its best advantages.
Many employees find telework especially beneficial for concentrating on focused tasks and for gaining the quiet time that can really boost creativity. Encourage your employees to schedule their own time to take advantage of telework. Recommend they set aside telework blocks for both the quiet, focused, absorbing work they have to do and for their creative brainstorming. For example, taking a walk while letting a thorny problem simmer on the mind's back burners can lead to much better answers, much faster than hours at a desk can do.

03 SHORING-UP PERFORMANCE FUNDAMENTALS

Our survey uncovered lots of evidence that teleworking employees feel at sea with regards to how their careers progress from this point. For example, many employees we surveyed say the nature of their work **(46 percent)** and expectations around their work **(43 percent)** have changed. Yet they also say they're not clear what success looks like **(47 percent)**.

Most troubling, only **a quarter (27 percent)** of respondents say they are getting enough coaching to succeed in this new telework environment.

27%
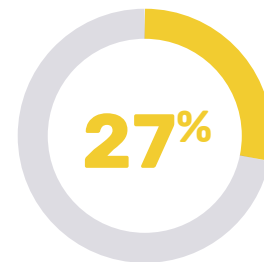
We recommend:

Calibrate performance and career management processes.

Set performance and measurement standards for teleworkers, especially as they relate to service (response times, etc.). Employees should have clear performance expectations, no matter where the employee sits.

Lay out what team outcomes mean for every individual's work on the team. For instance, define the work/activities employees should focus on in the short-term to help move the team toward its shared outcomes. Managers should clarify employees' day-to-day priorities, but also set aside time to talk about how their current responsibilities fit in with their longer-term career aspirations. Again, explicitly making the connections between the individual, the team, and the mission reinforces the principles of a culture of belonging.

Once safety allows, hold in-person get togethers regularly. In-person time goes a long way toward sustaining rapport offline. It also contributes to a less biased perspective during performance evaluations.

Provide the tools to help employees succeed.

Our survey revealed that less than a quarter of respondents (23 percent) feel their supervisors are helping them reprioritize their work. When managers are not onsite with employees, they need to take much less for granted and become much more intentional about making sure employees receive relevant messages. Reevaluate existing communications (content, channels, and frequency) with that point in mind.

Provide training and reminders on what makes people successful in a remote setting (such as minimize distractions, don't multitask, break larger objectives into a series of short-term goals, and so on).

Surface any performance gaps that warrant additional learning or coaching. For example, at Eagle Hill, we have built in real-time conversations into our performance management culture. Our expectation is that team leads will meet with their direct reports at least two times per month to share performance feedback. These meetings are in addition to frequent meetings about day-to-day work. A regular cadence of communication gives stability to the telework day.
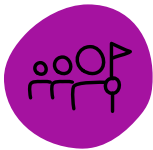
Elevate personal responsibility and accountability.

Ensure that employees realize their personal responsibility for speaking up—for validating their understanding about what the organization expects of them. Employees also need to know that their responsiveness to each other is key factor in how much they will trust each other.

Ask employees to make a teleworking personal responsibility pact. Some ideas include: "I commit to turn off social media during the workday" and "I commit to keeping my personal calendar updated." At Eagle Hill, when we discuss high performance, we encourage our employees to ask themselves whether others would readily turn to them when they seek outstanding results. Recommending introspection helps build performance ownership and accountability.
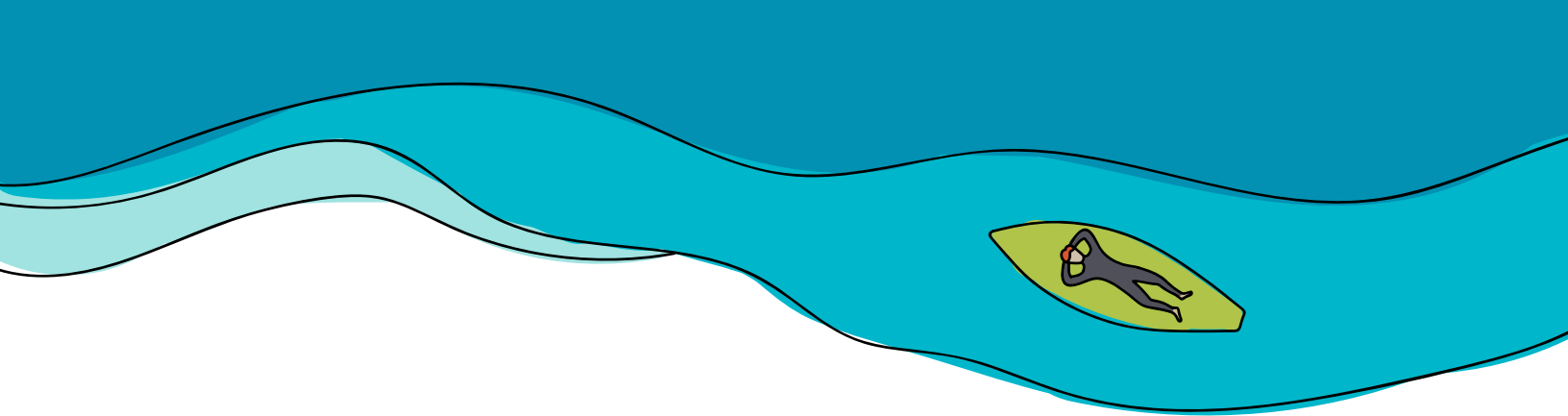
Waves may wash away what's familiar, but they can also reveal unexpected treasures. Similarly, we see real positives in the wave of dramatic change that 2020 has wrought in federal workplaces.

While recent OPM studies have shown an overall drop in federal employee morale, Eagle Hill's survey shows that teleworking during the pandemic has given a welcome boost to federal employees' commitment to their work. Agencies that path an intentional way through the sudden changes stand to see a future energized by their employees' renewed enthusiasm and loaded with possibility.

METHODOLOGY

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