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Home-based work in the public sector: 8 immediate recommendations

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Working
from
home

Editor's note: This blog post is part of a series for the Bureaucracy Lab, a World Bank initiative to better understand the world's public officials.

In response to the coronavirus, many public administrations have transitioned rapidly to home-based work (HBW). According to preliminary data – part of the Bureaucracy Lab's ongoing effort to monitor global responses to the pandemic – 136 countries have implemented some form of HBW for public sector employees. 🐦

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based-work-public-sector-8-immediate-recommendations/?
cid=EXT_WBBlogTweetableShare_D_EXT&via=worldbank) This switch poses new
challenges and novel constraints for millions of public officials across the globe,
some of whom are working to fight the impacts of COVID-19 while others are
continuing the normal work of government.

As the crisis continues to evolve, public administrations must enact immediate
measures to help public officials perform as effectively as possible. Short-term crisis
response measures are critical for continuity and agility in a time of tremendous
demand on governments.

1. Strengthen existing digital infrastructure for remote service delivery

To facilitate citizen access to services during HBW, governments should channel
service requests to online options 🐦 (https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?
text=To+facilitate+citizen+access+to+services+during+HBW%2C+governments+should+
based-work-public-sector-8-immediate-recommendations/?
cid=EXT_WBBlogTweetableShare_D_EXT&via=worldbank) where these exist;
strengthen digital infrastructure
(https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/governance/brief/govtech-putting-people-first)
to ensure accessibility, functionality, and security of online services; and pursue
additional digitization (https://blogs.worldbank.org/governance/inclusive-disruption-
harnessing-social-power-technology) of government functions where feasible.
Cameroon, Costa Rica and Uganda, for example, have allowed public officials to use
video conferencing to collaborate and interact with citizens. 🐦
(https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?
text=Cameroon%2C+Costa+Rica+and+Uganda%2C+for+example%2C+have+allowed+p
based-work-public-sector-8-immediate-recommendations/?
cid=EXT_WBBlogTweetableShare_D_EXT&via=worldbank) These shifts will help to
fulfill service delivery needs while allowing public officers to work meaningfully from
home. In the medium-to-long term, The World Bank's GovTech Global Partnership
(https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/governance/brief/govtech-putting-people-
first#001) can provide governments with a suite of services to advance strengthened
digital governance.

2. Implement exceptional regulatory procedures for remote service delivery

In tandem, governments should implement exceptional regulatory procedures that avoid direct human interaction and paper documentation to fulfill service delivery. Approval processes, decision-making authority, verification systems, staffing availability, and incentive structures should be reassessed and modified to the extent feasible to facilitate citizen access to services. Governments may consider, for example, extending decision-making authorities and operationalizing electronic signatures (http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/142431468324556507/Authentication-and-digital-signatures-in-e-law-and-security-a-guide-for-legislators-and-managers).

3. Ensure IT resources and literacy for public officers

Governments should ensure, to the extent feasible, that all public officers have access to an internet connection and IT equipment (https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/digitaldevelopment), including laptops and other devices. Complementary digital literacy training is key, particularly in rural areas and for more senior public officials who may lack prior experience with digital tools. IT resources and literacy play an important role not only in facilitating public officers' access to documents and systems, but also in fostering organizational communication. Establishing and strengthening virtual connectedness is now more important than ever for team morale and public sector productivity.

4. Mitigate IT-related corruption and security risks

In parallel, governments should set guidelines to mitigate corruption and security risks associated with HBW, such as abuse of electronic signatures. 🐦 (https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?text=governments+should+set+guidelines+to+mitigate+corruption+and+security+risks based-work-public-sector-8-immediate-recommendations/?cid=EXT_WBBlogTweetableShare_D_EXT&via=worldbank) INTERPOL has reported a significant increase in cybercrime attacks against government organizations and facilities in the COVID-19 era, underscoring the need for vigilant implementation of data security measures. Governments may consider making records of IT equipment borrowed by public officials, prohibiting family members' use of organizational equipment, and limiting the use of home printers for confidential documents.

5. Flatten the hierarchy

While public administration is typically marked by a considerable degree of hierarchy, command-and-control cultures do not lead to high performance for virtual teams (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07421222.2004.11045809). Instead, flatter structures fit better with telework (https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07421222.2004.11045809). Managers should foster shared team leadership and collaboration, and avoid imposing excessive policies and reporting procedures to track public officers' activity. While monitoring and metrics serve a purpose, high levels of remote oversight have been shown to diminish worker trust, morale, and productivity (http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.451.930&rep=rep1&type=pdf).

 In harnessing the impetus for autonomy during HBW, managers and organizations can catalyze meaningful long-term change 🐦 (https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?text=In+harnessing+the+impetus+for+autonomy+during+HBW%2C+managers+and+or term+change&url=https://blogs.worldbank.org/governance/home-based-work-public-sector-8-immediate-recommendations/?cid=EXT_WBBlogTweetableShare_D_EXT&via=worldbank): even in non-crisis periods, autonomy in the public sector breeds higher productivity (https://nam03.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fblogs.cuit.columbia.edu%2Fmcb2270%2Ffiles%2F2020%2F01%2FE and gets the job done better (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/ecoj.12418).

6. Facilitate connection and collaboration

During periods of public sector HBW, organizational commitment decreases and professional isolation increases (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ntwe.12040). What's more, isolation can lead to absenteeism and poor judgment. Forging connection between teams can help reverse these effects: managers (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ntwe.12040) should aim to develop interaction between team members and conduct regular check-ins to maintain communication between public officers. A HBW environment that integrates high task interdependence among teams can enhance trust, forge a sense of unity, and

encourage knowledge sharing. 🐦 (https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?
text=A%26nbsp%3BHBW+environment+that+integrates+high+task+interdependence+a
based-work-public-sector-8-immediate-recommendations/?
cid=EXT_WBBlogTweetableShare_D_EXT&via=worldbank)

7. Allow for flexible schedules

Governments should provide public officials with flexible scheduling options, which cultivate autonomy and foster productivity (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ntwe.12040). Such flexibility also helps level the playing field, as the experiences of HBW vary by gender (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1468-005X.2012.00289.x) and family structure (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ntwe.12010). Relative to men, women have been shown to experience lower concentration and motivation during HBW periods (https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2583246), a phenomenon linked to their greater share of household responsibilities. In the COVID-19 era especially, we can expect the burden of care – both for children out of school and for family members falling ill – to fall disproportionately on women (https://www.cgdev.org/blog/how-will-covid-19-affect-women-and-girls-low-and-middle-income-countries). Flexible schedules that accommodate heterogeneous employee needs can help alleviate this strain, protect mental health, and improve morale.

8. Make way for intermediary solutions

Many public administrations around the world may lack the infrastructure (https://blogs.worldbank.org/digital-development/africas-connectivity-gap-can-map-tell-story) or connectivity to immediately and exhaustively implement these solutions. Where a full adoption of HBW and these recommendations is not feasible, governments should seek out intermediary solutions. For example, if public officials can send emails from home but don't have a secure file sharing system, governments may recommend that they work primarily from home and go into the office once or twice a week. If some public officials have internet connection or access to a laptop at home and others do not, agencies may consider reallocating tasks within teams and units to enable remote work flow.

As COVID-19 tests the strength of public administrations around the world, it impels them to innovate, streamline, and flatten hierarchies as never before. In many cases, these short-term measures may require low immediate investment in infrastructure.

In all cases, they lay foundations for enhanced public sector productivity far into the future. Governments must act now – quickly and nimbly – to adapt their digital, legal, and organizational systems. Doing so will not only strengthen public administration today, but also build its resilience for tomorrow.

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