Q&A With the Experts:

Public Sector and the Remote Workforce

There was a time when telework was not considered essential to many government agencies. It was a perk or a privilege that was reserved for high performers. During COVID-19, telework has become the only way for many government agencies to safely deliver necessary services to the public. But how prepared was the workforce to make this shift? And more importantly, how prepared were states and cities to quickly and effectively put telework into motion at their agencies?

Follow along to read highlights from a discussion on The Public Sector and the Remote Workforce between the two government experts featured below.

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Linda is the public sector business consulting director at Kronos. She is a passionate, extensively experienced, and goal-oriented public sector subject matter expert and former payroll director with over 25 years' experience in both the private and public sectors. Linda is a Certified Payroll Professional, Certified Public Manager, IPMA-CP, and Certified Change Manager.

Linda comes to Kronos after previously working at the city and county of Denver, where she served as the director of citywide payroll operations and administration.

She leads a team of subject matter experts in state and local government and in K-12, and higher education.

Neil E. is the former executive director of the International Public Management Association for Human Resources (IPMA-HR), where he has worked since December 1980, initially as the director of government affairs.

Prior to joining IPMA-HR, Neil worked for a law firm specializing in labor and employment law. A highly regarded speaker and writer on human resources and employment issues, he has given numerous talks at leading conferences and to organizations throughout the world,.

Q&A: Public Sector and the Remote Workforce

In April, 1 million state and local workers were laid off or furloughed, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Twenty-one hundred municipalities are reporting budget shortfalls of up to 15 to 20 percent. And we're starting to hear the mantra "Do more with less, but do more."

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MAIN DIFFERENCES YOU'RE SEEING BETWEEN THE GREAT RECESSION THAT WE WENT THROUGH AND THIS PANDEMIC?

I just want to note the statistic that you cited – in fact, more public sector workers lost their jobs in April than during the entire Great Recession. So that's something to note. I think a big difference between what we're currently experiencing and the great recession is that this was triggered by a public health crisis, and while there are financial crises associated with both the Great Recession and what we are going through, the big difference is that this is primarily a public health crisis.

I think the big impact that we're seeing and a difference between the current situation and the Great Recession is that this public health crisis has resulted in some rather large and fundamental changes to the workforce and workplaces and in how work is being performed. And you know, the real question going forward, as we start to reopen and return to work is: What is that going to look like?

I think those are some good points. And they are interesting because this is a health crisis that created a financial crisis. So I'm curious whether we will see a quicker recovery from this, because in this particular case the economy wasn't really suffering prior to the pandemic.

DO YOU THINK THAT WE'LL SEE A QUICKER REBOUND AFTER THIS CURRENT CRISIS?

So, there's a V-shaped recovery. In other words, we descended very quickly and we're going to jump back up very quickly. There's also a W-shaped recovery, where we've gone down, we're going to go up and back up again. No one knows if we're going to get a second wave in the fall or the winter when the weather turns cooler and then drop back down or whether it's going to be U-shaped, where we're going to stay down for a while before going back up.

But I think the fundamentals of the economy were very strong earlier this year, prior to when the pandemic hit, so that would point to our having a quicker recovery.

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I do think that where workers were furloughed, they're more likely to be recalled. I think there are some small businesses that may just shut completely, and that's very sad. And then there may be impacts that depend on what the return to work looks like for some of the businesses. For example, if we see a large number of organizations that have employees continue to work from home, particularly in cities and large office buildings, what's going to happen to the nearby restaurants and coffee shops, if only half the workers return?

So, that was a long answer to say, I'm not really sure what's going to happen. But again, and you know, the economy was strong going into this. So that at least should give us some optimism, right?

That's right. You've got to find some type of a light in all of this. So hopefully that will help us for sure. So, along those same lines, in May an article was published stating that Travis County, Texas, plans to have a large portion of its workforce work from home permanently, and of about 5,000 employees, 3,000 would qualify.

WHAT ARE YOU HEARING ACROSS THE COUNTRY REGARDING THE CURRENT AND FUTURE STATE OF TELEWORKING IN STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

IPMA-HR did a survey back in March, and what was interesting is that when we asked what were the biggest benefits and what were the biggest challenges of working remotely, one issue on both lists was work-life balance.

Now, some of the people who said it was a challenge might have been simultaneously working remotely and supervising children who were doing online school from home, and I could see where that could create a lot of challenges. But I think organizations are going to have to address some issues around all of this.

One is the whole issue of ergonomics. Do employees who are working from home have the right equipment? Do they have comfortable chairs like they might have had in an office, or are we as organizations or governments going to provide those for them?

I saw a British study where one of the things people were complaining about were their aching backs and necks, because they didn't have the right equipment. They were saying ,"This is really not for me." And then we have the whole issue of managing a remote workforce and having governments train their managers so that they're equipped to manage that. How do we keep our employees engaged while they're working remotely so they don't feel isolated?

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I was on a weekly call with HR directors from the larger cities and counties, and a couple of them were saying that they were using various tools to make sure to connect on a regular basis, even a daily basis, with members of their teams. One of the HR directors' requirements was that everyone had to appear on the screen because they wanted to make sure that people were actually getting dressed and were functioning as they would if they were coming into an office.

Those definitely sound like valid concerns. The shift to remote work is new to these workers, and lots of things that they haven't had to previously think about on a mass scale are now top of mind.

WHAT ABOUT CYBERSECURITY ISSUES WITH PEOPLE WORKING FROM HOME?

Then we certainly have cybersecurity issues related to working from home. You have people using laptops that are their personal equipment. Are governments going to be able to provide equipment? We had a couple of governments there that were saying, "We just can't afford to buy our employees this equipment, and so what we're doing is simply saying this is temporary and to use their own equipment." That's fine, but these government recognize long term that the cybersecurity issues are very real, and that's probably not an ideal solution for them.

If there's no other alternative, it seems like using personal equipment won't be an infrequent occurrence, at least on a temporary basis.

LET'S TALK ABOUT MANAGING POTENTIAL OVERTIME CLAIMS FROM REMOTE, NONEXEMPT EMPLOYEES. WHAT ARE YOU SEEING?

People wonder if they're working more hours than they are supposed to be and they're actually recording them, are you going to wind up with an issue there? For employees who have timekeeping software implemented, that solution can help address that problem. They need to make sure that they're training their managers so that they know not to be contacting their employees at all hours of the night because that physical separation no longer exists. Our devices all ping and tell us that we have messages coming in, and it's hard to resist looking at them and responding.

I know that there are those issues. I think a remote workplace becomes a worksite during normal working hours when people are working, so if someone is working remotely and they trip over the dog and fall down the stairs, you might have a workers' compensation claim. I suspect that very few governments are going out and inspecting the homes of everyone who is working remotely, because this thing hit very quickly.

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I saw an article from Peter Cappelli, a professor at the Wharton School, and he was saying that he doesn't think that in the long term there is going to be an increase in remote working, and one of the things he cited was the whole area of performance management.

DO YOU THINK PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS WILL BE WHAT SLOWS DOWN THE REMOTE WORK TREND IN THE LONG TERM?

Employees don't like using it. Managers probably like it even less. And various things have been done to address those obstacles with different degrees of success.

If we're going to be working remotely, certainly that's going to be a key area. Employees have to know what they're supposed to be doing because you're not going to be able to see them on a daily basis. And organizations really have to consider whether remote work is necessarily the right thing in an environment where you need collaboration. Going forward, that's something the organizations will have to consider when someone needs a lot of supervision and interaction.

I think that this is a good transition into employee engagement.

HOW CAN ORGANIZATIONS MAKE SURE MANAGERS AND EMPLOYEES ARE COMFORTABLE AND ENGAGED DURING PERIODS OF REMOTE WORK?

I would start with the managers and make sure that they understand what's involved in managing remotely and make sure that they're comfortable doing that. And then I think it is important to addressed the whole issue of keeping the employees engaged and making sure that they're not isolated. From the calls that I used to participate in, HR directors would say that they had employees who were saying. "This remote working is just not for me," and they would be asking for transfers to jobs where they had to come in. If you're really thrive on that interaction with everyone at work and suddenly you live alone and you're home alone, that can have a real negative impact on you.

I think organizations are going to have to look at being flexible, with employees and not just say "Well, everyone has to work from home", because you may lose good people as a result of that. Aside from that, government has the challenge with the fact that they have some jobs where employees have to be there. The waste management people can't pick up garbage remotely.

They have those jobs where employees have to be there, and I think government will have some issues where employees may feel like "Why does my co-worker get to work from home and I have to come in to work?". There may be some morale issues that need to be addressed.

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I completely agree with you. Another thing that I have seen recently is the conversation around essential versus nonessential personnel in government. Government can't just stop providing services, and HR professionals have to decide who is furloughed and who is not.

WHAT IS SOME ADVICE THAT YOU CAN GIVE TO HR PROFESSIONALS WHO ARE HAVING TO MAKE THESE TOUGH FURLOUGH DECISIONS?

I'm not a fan of that essential/nonessential distinguishing term. I know the federal government uses it when there are these unfortunate partial shutdowns. But we talk about how our employees are our most important asset and it's all about the workers and the employees, and then we turn around and say, "Oh, by the way, you're nonessential. Stay home, we don't want you coming in."

But I think there's a difference, and I know some cities have used hazard pay to help address it. Some are providing hazard pay and they're looking at what they're calling front-facing employees – those who have to be on the frontline and deal with the public, and then drawing distinctions between emergency responders and public health workers and someone who might be int a customer service area dealing with the public.

I think they need to consider how to make sure that they can provide the essential services and then, if they need to furlough, come up with a plan for that. I know that the City of Baltimore was proposing that rather than letting employees go, they were going to share the pain, if you will, and the city was going to require that all employees to have a certain number of furlough days.

So, yes, I think it's a real challenge. Hopefully, as governments move forward, they can do this in a collaborative way. Now is a time for compassionate and caring leadership. I'm stealing that phrase from Aron Ain, who's the CEO of Kronos. I read an article that he wrote, and that's his phrasing and it really resonated and stuck with me.

I want to thank you for your time today, Neil.

DO YOU HAVE ANY LAST THOUGHTS THAT YOU'D LIKE TO SHARE?

You know, I think my closing thought would be to give everyone in government a big **thank you**. I mean that from the bottom of my heart. I can't thank you enough for all you're doing. I recognize that many of you are putting your health at risk, and it is greatly appreciated.

So thank you.