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MEETINGS WILL NEVER BE THE SAME

Working remotely because of COVID has shifted mindsets and business plans

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Businesses across Long Island say remote work practices forced by the pandemic will likely have a permanent impact on day-to-day operations, with many expecting to rely more heavily on telecommuting. Some even anticipate the five-

day in-office work week will become a thing of the past.

In a Newsday survey of more than two dozen Long Island businesses, representing tens of thousands of employees worldwide, the overwhelming majority said they preferred a “hybrid” work model, even after COVID-19 is no longer a threat. This model allows for

flexibility — an environment where employees have the option to work remotely some days and work in-office others. Of the 28 businesses polled, only four anticipated remaining almost completely office based.

Reasons for the shift to broader remote work policies included increased productivity, happier employees, no com-

mute, and the ability to recruit talent from outside the geographical area. Detractors, meanwhile, say a greater focus on remote work will dehumanize businesses and isolate workers.

The local trend is in line with what businesses are thinking nationally. Sixty-eight percent of organizations say they will probably or definitely adopt broader

work-from-home policies, even after the threat of COVID is over, according to a national survey conducted by the Society for Human Resources management, which polled 1,087 HR professionals in mid-May. The larger the company, the more likely they are to introduce

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Firms grapple with a new mindset that may be more efficient, but also less warm and fuzzy

WORK from A29

greater flexibility, with 73% of organizations with 500-plus employees reporting they'll introduce more expansive telecommuting policies.

No looking back

"I don't think anyone is going back to what we did before," said Christine Ippolito, founder and principal at Compass Workforce Solutions, a Hauppauge-based human resources consulting company. It's necessary, she said, for companies to "think about what the best way is to run my business and be as efficient as I can in the new environment. That needs to be the mindset; not, 'When can we go back to what we used to do?'"

Ippolito, who has seven employees, believes the hybrid model is the way to go, and she foresees many in-person meetings becoming virtual for good. "Work is hard enough," she said. "Let's take down the obstacles and the barriers that can make it torturous."

There's also the fact that many companies aren't in a position to offer cash incentives because of the economic downturn. "Flexibility is something they can give employees," she said.

Chris Perry, president of Lake Success-based Broadridge Financial Solutions, which has 12,000 employees worldwide and about 2,000 on Long Island, said he has noticed distinct productivity gains now that workers no longer have to commute (1,500 of the Long Island employees have been working remotely since mid-March). He believes Broadridge will also shift to a hybrid model.

"Technology has enabled us



Christopher Ulrich, founder of the marketing company Direct Response Group, says he can imagine doing away with its Melville office. Remote work has improved productivity, he says.

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to now work from home," he said. "Flexibility of the workplace is key, and we don't want to lose this opportunity. . . . It's about trusting your associates and giving them an environment where they can thrive and deliver results. Some can do that with more time away from the workplace."

Michael Ceschini, managing member of Ceschini CPAs in Miller Place, said that since accountants are already used to working from home during the busy months, he can see firms like his strongly considering the hybrid route, even during slow periods. It would, though, likely depend on the employee — those who've proven to be more disciplined are more likely to be offered remote work opportunities.

Since almost all the companies surveyed had to do some restructuring when the pandemic hit, the infrastructure to work remotely is already in place. Continuing to use it just makes good sense, said Anthony Acampora, partner-in-charge at Silverman Acampora, a Jericho law firm.

"We're fortunate we upgraded our computer system recently and it makes it a lot easier for us" to integrate telecommuting in the future, Acampora said. "It's been working fine. It's the new normal."

Expert urges caution

Still, companies should be cautious when making these decisions, said Karen Sobel Lojeski, founder and CEO of the Suffolk County-based Virtual

Distance International and author of "The Power of Virtual Distance: A Guide to Productivity and Happiness in the Age of Remote Work."

"My concern is that if we tip the balance right now and we decide, 'Oh yeah, telecommuting or remote work is the best thing no matter what happens, we create a totally different work dynamic," said Lojeski, who holds a doctorate in technology management. "I don't know if that's the right thing to do. I don't believe it is."

Lojeski is concerned about companies making rash decisions in reaction to the pandemic. And though she's a proponent of the hybrid model, she believes companies that primarily have been office-based need to ease into it.

Companies need to put aside money "to have a lot of in-person events when we get over this hump," she said. "People have gone through this trauma and cognitive dissonance and sense of isolation and I actually think we're going to have to err on the side of being more in-person to begin with, because we need to heal."

That social aspect is integral to a business, said Rich Michals, president of PMAC, a Farmland-based logistics and freight management company. Since freight was considered essential, his employees returned to the office just a few weeks after the shutdown and it's "business as usual," he said. Michals believes the transition to remote work can be harmful. "There are people who live alone, so their only socialization comes from being in the workplace." Isolation, he said, is a "dangerous, dangerous thing."

Bob Venero, CEO and founder of Future Tech, a Holbrook IT solutions company, was cautious at the start of the pandemic, shutting down the office in February. But once the pandemic is no longer a threat, he, like Michals, prefers an in-office model.

"I'm a big fan of . . . looking someone in the eye and shaking their hand, and that's vital to a company's survival, to a company's ethical values," he said.

And some companies, like Northport's Cybersecurity Ventures, which publishes Cybercrime Magazine, need their office to create the best possible product. As long as it's safe to do so, the company wants employees to use the in-office studio to record media, said founder Steve Morgan. That said, they've already hired a



Future Tech CEO Bob Venero, at the firm's office in Holbrook, says he's a big fan of the handshake and of looking a person in the eye.

Maine-based remote employee and may do more of that kind of hiring for some jobs.

Sometimes, workers are the ones who say they would rather work from the office, which is what happened at Jillian's Circus, an Oceanside internet marketing company, according to founder Jillian Weston. "They prefer separating work life from home life," she said.

Rise of the digital nomad

For others, though, there are big-picture benefits to not being tied to an office, and some, like Christopher Ulrich, CEO and founder of Direct Response Group, can imagine getting rid of the space altogether. Instead, companies may choose to rent out a conference room or something similar for monthly meetings.

Ulrich, who spoke via a video-chat setup in his basement that included multiple monitors, a microphone and a green screen projecting his company's logo, said neither his employees nor the people he's networked with seem eager to return to the office.

The website design and marketing company has five employees who worked out of the Melville office, pre-pandemic, and five remote workers.

"People like not commuting," he said. "They like not sitting in traffic. And from my perspective, I'm seeing people



Future Tech's office closed at the start of the pandemic in February. Here, computer monitors are ready to be sent to remote workers.

putting in more hours and being more productive than they were in the office."

Matt Goker, COO of ATA Freight in Garden City, said that, depending on the job, he can even see people becoming digital nomads — employees who spend pockets of time in different locations due to work flexibility. "At the very minimum, [you're going to have] a better balance between telecommute and traditional commute," he said. "Companies who can figure out how to leverage the added efficiencies of telecommute while creating adequate physical interaction will make the most out of the post-COVID era."

Rob Basso, CEO of Associ-

ated HCM, a business management company, said they'll likely allow employees to work remotely until the end of the year "and potentially permanently. In fact, we hired a remote employee starting soon."

A lesson from the crisis

For nearly all, the pandemic has brought on a time of reevaluation. "It took this terrible, terrible event to teach us a new lesson in how we work," said Bernard Hyman, managing partner at Certilman, Balin, Adler & Hyman.

Hyman believes a part-time remote work model could work for his law firm because it engenders better quality of life, and helps parents deal with

pressing child care concerns.

"I think employees really enjoyed working from home," said Chris Sedlacek, senior director and general manager of corporate communications at Canon U.S.A. in Melville. "We were finding that our employees were more productive. . . . I [also] think there will be a hybrid model because I think there's a sense of isolation if you're just home five days a week."

Jennifer Trakhtenberg, senior talent leader at ClearVision Optical in Hauppauge, said their company noticed the same uptick in productivity, and a survey of employees indicated that many would be interested in having some form of remote work continue.

It also can increase the talent pool, said Karen Bennett, chief human resources officer at Berdon LLP, an accounting firm with offices in Jericho and Manhattan. Flexibility is necessary to be competitive in the market, she said. "It also helps you potentially get candidates that are outside the tri-state area." They, too, are examining a hybrid model, since they found their workforce to be "very, very productive" during the stay-at-home order.

A number of employers surveyed expressed surprise at how quickly their staff adapted.

"We were thrown into the fire right away," said Kevin O'Connor, president and chief

ON THE COVER

Christine Ippolito of Compass Workforce Solutions expects the hybrid office model to grow.

Video: [newsday.com/business](https://www.newsday.com/business)

executive officer of BNB Bank. "It went way smoother than I thought it was going to. . . . The bank was very involved in the Paycheck Protection Program. We did close to 4,000 [of the loans] and close to a billion dollars. We had people working at their kitchen tables at all hours of the night. Productivity did not drop at all."

Lorelei McGlynn, senior vice president and chief human resource officer at Melville-based Henry Schein, a distributor of medical and dental supplies with 19,000 employees worldwide, said they saw "extraordinary levels of commitment, innovation and teamwork" while working from home.

Is a 'home base' needed?

Even companies that never considered telecommuting as a viable long-term option are now considering it.

Eva LaMere, president of Austin Williams, a digital marketing firm, said that originally, she thought remote work might stunt creativity and collaboration, but that hasn't proven true. Now the Hauppauge-based company, which has 50 employees, is exploring how they'll integrate telecommuting into their future. Still, "it's important for clients to know this [office] is our home base," she said.

But companies are also reevaluating the need for office space. Rich Humann, president and CEO of H2M, a Melville architecture and engineering firm, said that prior to the pandemic, they were thinking of expanding their offices. Now they're assessing how much remote work can be done in the future.

"We want to come up with a strategy based on returns, not based on a continuing reaction to the pandemic," he said.

It also appears the stigma of remote work has disappeared in this new landscape, said Joseph Saracino, president and CEO of Cino Ltd., a risk management, cybersecurity and training firm. "Before the pandemic, many thought working from home gave an appearance that your business was more at a mom-and-pop level," he said. "Surprising to many, it's now the new norm."

With Barbara Barker

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