

COVER STORY

# Remote Work

*A New Opportunity for Economic Prosperity in Rural America*

By Paul Hill



## Introduction

Since the industrial revolution, where we live has been determined by where we work. Today, this condition has driven most of our population to reside in urban centers where higher paying jobs have clustered (Demsas, 2022). The traditional office environment emerged around the processing of copious amounts of paper, and “the fact that it remained so dominant for so long may reflect a market failure” (The Economist, 2020). Considering how the nature of work has evolved away from place (i.e., gathering in a central location) and towards task facilitation (i.e., how work gets done), Dingel and Neiman (2020) found that nearly 40% of jobs in the U.S. can be performed entirely at home or anywhere there is an internet connection and access to information and communication technologies.

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### **The Diffusion of Remote Work**

Despite being introduced in the late 1970s, multiple studies report the adoption of remote work occurring slowly over time, (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Dutton et al., 1987; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Hamilton, 2011; Martin, 2012; Mokhtarian, 1991; Useem, 2017). In my own study of remote work adoption, conducted in the U.S. in November 2020, results showed an increase in remote work implementation in response to COVID-19 (Hill, 2021). Most organizational leaders who implemented the practice during this time considered the experience favorable and estimated that some employees would continue to work remotely after COVID-19. However, according to Everitt Rogers’ (2003) theory of Diffusion of Innovations, the unanticipated implementation of remote work does not represent true adoption of the practice, but a positive experience with the practice on a trial basis increases the likelihood of adoption in the future.

In a more recent Pew Research Center survey conducted in January 2022, 59% of U.S. workers who reported that their job duties could be performed from home were still working from home all or most of the time (Parker et al., 2022). While this metric is down from 71% at the height of the coronavirus pandemic in October 2020, it is substantially higher than the 23% of U.S. workers who reported working from home frequently before COVID-19 (Parker et al., 2020). Based on the prevailing practice of remote work and high favorability levels in response to COVID-19, it is expected that organizations will continue to progress through the process of remote work adoption until it becomes standard practice (Rogers, 2003).

We are now witnessing the widespread adoption of remote work, attributable to advances in technology and economic shifts to more service and knowledge-based industries, but primarily accelerated by COVID-19 (Hill, 2021; Shreedhar et al., 2022). Prior to the pandemic, the practice of remote work was more uncommon than it should have been. The unexpected rise of remote work was not a one-time event, but the perpetuation of a decades long trend of an increasing segment of the workforce working remotely (Rembert, 2021). The diffusion of remote work as a modern workplace practice is changing the landscape of business operations, but it also has the potential to fundamentally reshape the economies of rural America (Demsas, 2022).

### **Irregular Migration Trends**

While more people are working remotely than ever before, new studies reveal that they are also planning to move (Haslag & Weagley, 2021; Ozimek, 2022). This is because “for the first time, remote work allowed many people across the country to see a life in which the location of their job and where they live did not have to be one and the same” (Ozimek, 2022). We are only beginning to see the sweeping societal impacts of remote work, but the geographic influence of the practice has already demonstrated that change is well underway.

In a 2022 study of over 23,000 people in the U.S., Upwork, a freelance talent marketplace, identified remote work as a primary factor influencing Americans’ plans to relocate (Ozimek, 2022). The study estimates between 14 to 23 million Americans are planning to move

as a result of remote work. Of those planning to move, 21% lived in major cities and 53% were seeking more affordable housing. These metrics combined with those already planning to move (regardless of remote work), signals that near-term migration levels could increase three to four times their typical rate.

The widespread adoption of remote work is not expected to be fleeting. Barrero et al. (2021) provided several pieces of evidence and analysis supporting why remote work will endure beyond the pandemic. In particular, their research uncovered how U.S. patent applications for technologies that facilitate remote work more than doubled from January to September 2020. This development is expected to raise the effectiveness and quality of remote work over time, thus reinforcing the shift to remote work as a modern workplace practice. Overall, the pandemic's forced implementation of remote work removed hesitations related to biased expectations, experimentation costs, and coordination within business networks that had previously restrained the practice. With remote work expected to stick, we should expect migration trends to persist.

### **Positioning Rural America for Economic Prosperity**

Migration trends stimulated by remote work have unique implications for rural areas. As rural leaders we must anticipate these trends and appropriately position our communities to respond proactively. To this end, the Center on Rural Innovation provided six practical and creative recommendations for rural leaders to consider when creating economic and workforce development strategies and programs (Rembert, 2021). The following recommendations were based on extensive analysis of trends for rural America:

1. Build the broadband infrastructure of the future, and make sure people know where it is.

2. When attracting remote workers, incorporate housing into your economic development strategy.
3. Create spaces, places, and programs where remote workers can meet and network.
4. When working to increase remote employment for local workers, focus workforce development efforts on skills aligned with remote work professions.
5. When attracting remote workers, target workers that already have connections to your community.
6. Invest in quality of life. (Rembert, 2021, pp. 12-15)

The widespread adoption of remote work is a special occasion for rural areas to (1) leverage their community assets and distinct strengths to attract new residents with remote jobs, and (2) expand the local job market for current residents (Rembert, 2021). After years of stagnant or declining economic growth in rural America, the potential opportunities remote work can bring should excite rural leaders who recognize the chance they have to spur employment levels and cultivate a base of local talent in new ways.

Utah State University Extension's Rural Online Initiative (ROI) provides specialized remote work training to individuals for success in a rapidly changing economy (Rural Online Initiative, 2022). The program allows rural communities to provide on-going education, leverage existing talent and infrastructure, and strengthen county economic bases without requiring residents or new businesses to relocate. The ROI program takes an innovative approach to economic development for rural communities as remote work applies to more than just high-tech industries. It is a unique strategy for reducing unemployment, diversifying economies, and increasing median incomes throughout rural Utah.

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When embracing remote work as an economic development strategy, like Utah State University Extension has done, it is important to consider the approach that is most suitable for your community’s needs. Ultimately, there are many aspects to a remote work strategy because it integrates quality of life, broadband infrastructure, workforce development, placemaking, and housing. In most cases there are two types of remote work strategies, with each requiring a distinct emphasis. One strategy focuses on (1) attracting and retaining remote workers, while the other focuses on (2) increasing demand for remote jobs by expanding employment opportunities for the local workforce. Regardless, the outcome is the same for both: increasing employment in remote jobs.

### **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted the largest remote work experiment in history, while also setting in motion an accelerated rate of adoption for the innovative practice that shows significant signs of enduring. We are no longer limited to where we live by where we work and remote work is now a primary factor influencing Americans’ plans to relocate. Given this societal shift, rural areas are well positioned to embrace remote work strategies that leverage their assets and strengths to retain and attract new residents with remote jobs, thus expanding local job markets for residents. Following decades of economic distress in rural America, remote work brings exciting new opportunities that were unimaginable before the pandemic. Rural

leaders now have an extraordinary chance to stimulate the economies of their rural communities in ways they never have before.\*

### **About the Author**

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## **MAKING REMOTE WORK**

### **UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION'S RURAL ONLINE INITIATIVE**

**Empower Families** - Increase median household income & quality of life for citizens of rural Utah.

**Provide Education** - Change attitudes, knowledge, and behavior regarding remote work opportunities.

**Job Creation** - Reduce local unemployment rates without the expense of recruiting new businesses.

**Retain Local Talent** - Reduce post high school relocation.

**Improve Rural Viability** - Fortify rural businesses through online expansion.

**Strengthen Tax Base** - A bigger population with bigger incomes means more revenue for your city.

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