

FALL 2023



Women Tech Leaders

**Working
Group**

The Impact of Remote Work on Women in Federal Technology

Shifting working environments and mandates
across the federal government presents unique challenges
and opportunities for women.

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Virtual work remains a part of the future of work.

In a December 2022 report, OPM Director Kiran Ahuja wrote “there is no going back” from remote work’s influence on government operations.

“All employers that have work that can be done from home also embraced telework,” she wrote. “As a result, there has been a sea change in the American labor market.”

But in the national capital region, widespread telework has also negatively impacted the local economy, and consequently the federal government has faced pressure to bring employees back into offices.

President Joe Biden has also made promises that federal

employees would be back in D.C. offices soon. An August 2023 White House memo asked Cabinet officials to increase the amount of in-person work at federal agencies, calling it “critical” to workplace culture and mission delivery. The message signals that the COVID-19-era maximum telework period is coming to an end.

But what these changes mean for women in the federal government in particular remains a question.

During GovCIO Media & Research’s Women Tech Leaders working group meeting on Sept. 14, federal leaders discussed how telework has changed approaches to work and how an increased return-to-office mandate could impact the federal workforce. 🌸



Women Are Impacted by Return-to-Office Policies

The future of work is top of mind for federal leaders as the push to return to offices hits many federal agencies. Over the past three years, the rise of remote work drastically increased as the pandemic disrupted society and the national economy. But there are some concerns for going back into the office, especially for women.

One big impact was the reduction of commuting — which unlocked upward of 72 minutes per day, according to a study by the National Bureau of Economic Research. The extra time created opportunities for workers to do other things like more hobbies or managing their household.

Another study from the Economic Innovation Group found that more remote work during the pandemic might have influenced decisions for families to have more children.

In 2022, the Office of Personnel Management created new policies for remote work to provide a flexible work and hiring environment that helped

open up the talent pool for jobs. Overall, the policies were successful at improving retention and reducing turnover among promising employees.

“FEMA is actually doing a lot in this arena. We are now advertising positions that have multiple workplace worksites, we’re advertising telework and remote work, and we’re also looking at the cybersecurity community. And we’re implementing an incentive plan and retention plan for the cybersecurity community, which I think has helped a lot in moving this forward,” said Monica Langley, who was deputy CIO at FEMA, during the July 2022 Women Tech Leaders Summit.

Despite the benefits of remote work, there are some drawbacks. For instance, some federal leaders see a possibility for women to be left behind in career advancements down the line if they are not regularly seen in the office. 🌟



AI and Emerging Technology Are Here

Amid the changing working environment came a shift in emerging technology development. Recently this has led to increased attention to technologies like artificial intelligence. The technology is showing early promise in helping their missions, and government leadership across agencies like the Defense Department are keen to integrate the technology ethically. Amid this movement arises challenges across the workforce.

For one, there is an underlying amount of fear associated with AI in particular due to a lack of training and standards development that can be exacerbated by challenges posed by remote training programs, group leaders noted. Plus, increased remote work makes emerging tech that much more complicated.

If women don't get on board the AI train, working group members noted that they also risk being left behind in this quickly changing market that is increasingly embracing the technology.

Involving women and a diverse workforce overall in AI development can ensure algorithms that are feeding the tools are created with the most varied perspectives in mind. But it's challenging to ensure that diversity is present

when the number of women seeking careers in technology are declining.

"AI is a reflection of those who develop it and the data sets we use," said Labor Department Chief Strategist Kathy McNeill during a fireside chat in 2021. "Think how we've evolved and changed since then. Some of our government systems are even older than that — think of the biases that must exist in those systems. There are data sets we use today that were developed in the 60s that had women tagged as homemakers when in fact they were teachers, or scientists, or lawyers. We need women, and we need women of diverse backgrounds to make sure we're doing real technical work to minimize the biases in systems."

To eliminate the fear around the implementation of emerging technology, members of the working group see benefits in peer-to-peer training curricula followed by a series of conversations to share best practices and use cases.

While technologies like AI provide capabilities that increase efficiency, they also require layers of protection to have ample safeguards against errors and data biases. Consequently, federal leaders often note AI must have a human in the loop to review results and prevent errors. 🌟

**Peer-to-peer training
curricula followed by a series
of conversations to share best
practices and use cases can help
ensure no one gets left behind
in the AI age.**



Making In-Person Work More Meaningful



As agencies gear up various policies for in-person work amid hybrid environments, federal leaders are turning attention to take advantage of in-person experiences.

One example is mentoring women new in their positions. This can include appointing someone in or outside your team to shadow leaders for a day to learn skills like collaboration, conducting meetings and problem-solving.

Another example is hosting occasional in-person meetings where staff can ask leadership questions and engage with each other without the

barrier of a laptop screen.

These intentional experiences are critical during a time when the next generation enters the workforce and has to learn these softer skills with fewer face-to-face opportunities amid hybrid and remote-work environments.

Overall, working group members see importance in face time, while still maintaining the flexibility remote work provides. The key is finding that balance. 🌸

Remote Work's Impact on Recruiting and Hiring Women



Hybrid and remote-work schedules have greatly impacted the recruiting environment as recruiters were not necessarily bound by a geographically focused applicant pool.

Now with newer policies on in-person work, government agencies are assessing what to do about remote hires that were brought in during widespread remote-work periods amid recent calls to return to the office.

This is now creating challenges for women in technology leadership positions and recruiting quality talent.

For instance, a recent survey suggests more than half of Millennials and Generation Z preferred remote work. Recruiting from these talent pools can present challenges when attracting this next generation of technologists and leaders, especially women.

Even recruiting working mothers can be challenging if their preference to work remote leads to not bringing in quality candidates. This is especially important as women often take the burden of family caregiving, according to recent studies. 🌸

Face time is important while still maintaining the flexibility remote work provides. The key is finding that balance.

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What's Next?



As federal leaders evolve their in-person and remote-work strategies, creating a balance for the workforce can lead to widespread opportunities for developing the next generation of women tech leaders.

The increased flexibility for family caregivers makes women more

productive, and the flexibility supports healthy work-life balances.

Still there are numerous benefits for women when working in person, including mentorship opportunities, face time with leadership and acquiring new skills. The key will be finding the right balance for the entire workforce. 🌟

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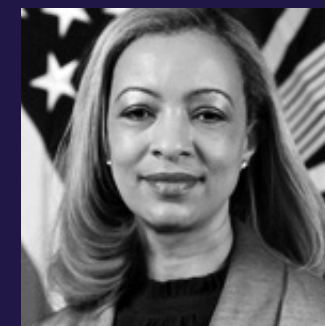
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