



Cornhusker Economics

Remote Work Is Not Going Away: How Can Rural Communities Take Advantage of this Opportunity?

The pandemic gave us the spike in remote work during 2020 to over 50% but since then, it has decreased. Right now, according to the Harvard Business Review¹, it has hovered around 28% since early 2023.

So, will it go lower or are we looking at a national remote work “new normal” with a hybrid office and remote work combination as an additional option? This is an important question for rural areas. If you can work anywhere, rural areas with recreational opportunities, that can play off of ties to family and friends, and with family friendly communities offer some relocation enticements that were not there before the remote work phenomenon. This national trend can offer new opportunities that should not be dismissed by rural community leaders. But is this a blip on the chart or will remote work be a lasting trend? What are experts predicting?

Remote Work Trends

Researchers speculate that there are good reasons why remote work will be a permanent part of the equation in the future – there is no going back now. Historical trends support four situations that pull the U.S workforce into the popularity of continued remote work¹:

- As technology improves, so does the share of people working remotely. The increased accessibility and lower cost of technology just makes working from home that much easier. The paper-based economy of the 1960's has evolved into an electronic document and video conferencing economy of the 2020's.
- New business startups assume this is the future and will continue to use it. They don't know any other way! They are going to tap into expertise wherever and whenever

they can access it, regardless of whether it is down the street or a continent away.

- As a country, the U.S. is in a great position to continue remote work. In a recent survey², the United States was only behind Canada and the United Kingdom with some of the highest percentages currently paying for remote work. We have a history of doing remote work, so it only seems logical to keep up that trend.
- Finally, and perhaps more importantly, employees like it. Many see it as a benefit which can help reduce employee turnover and lower their cost of commuting to work. It also allows them to better use their commute time for more productive activities, either for work or for personal use. Employees appreciate the flexibility it offers to help them balance work and family obligations. Also, from an environmental perspective, less travel time and office time can reduce energy consumption and costs in ways that impact both the employee and employer.

Steps Needed to Leverage Remote Work

So, let's agree that remote work is here to stay. Then how can communities, especially rural communities, take advantage of this expanded opportunity? Community members will need to strategize newcomer recruitment and retention in a much more holistic and deliberate way³. They may need to ask themselves, how will they...

- *Understand* - learn about the experience of becoming a newcomer to our community?
- *Market* - get the message out that our community

has opportunities for them?

- *Recruit* -help potential new residents choose our community?
- *Welcome* – newcomers once they arrive?
- *Engage* – newcomers and help them participate in community activities and events?
- *Help them belong* – cultivate a sense of belonging for new residents?
- *Manage them leaving* – connect with people that leave so that they can be a positive advocate for the community, even after leaving.

This could be a different approach for some communities. They may not have had conversations that span the scope of these questions or have thought about them as a package linked to newcomer recruitment. But this is doable. All it takes is a new way of thinking about expanded remote work opportunities through the eyes of potential newcomers.

References:

¹<https://hbr.org/2023/08/survey-remote-work-isnt-going-away-and-executives-know-it?ab=HP-hero-latest-text-2>

²<https://wfhresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/GSWA-2023.pdf>

³Linscheid, N. & LeMier D. (2023). Resident Recruitment, Welcoming and Retention Strategies. Community Economic Development Lunch and Learn Webinar Series, University of Wisconsin- Madison Extension Division. Available at: [Unlocking the Potential: Exploring Rural Recruitment & Welcoming Strategies – Community Economic Development \(wisc.edu\)](https://www.wisc.edu/extension/development/2023/06/Unlocking-the-Potential-Exploring-Rural-Recruitment-&Welcoming-Strategies-Community-Economic-Development)

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