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Government from the kitchen table (part 1)

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young professional man working remotely

The idea that public servants could run government from the kitchen table would have been impossible two years ago. And then they did it. Public officials all over the world adjusted to remote work like employees in the rest of the economy. As Rob Seidner, the Performance Manager for Federal Human Capital Policy at the United States' Executive Office of the President on Management and Budget told a recent World Bank [seminar](#), "everyone learned to work from home, on their phones or on their computers" and continued to provide the public services they were responsible for.

Now governments must determine the extent to which their employees should return to the central offices that they had trudged to for many years before the COVID-19 pandemic shook things up.  Much debate rages on the subject, as the flexibility of working from home is balanced against potential threats to not having a community of public service. But what do public officials themselves think about what to do? To find out, the [World Bank's Bureaucracy Lab](#) – in collaboration with its Global Survey of Public Servants consortium partners – has conducted surveys over the past two years, tailored to the specific concerns of each government, with over 110,000 public employees in seven countries.

The surveys tell us that **remote work is here to stay: many public employees have experienced working remotely, and most want to continue doing so after the pandemic.** In Brazil, 85% of public officials worked remotely at least part of the time, compared to 80% in Colombia, 77% in Chile and 70% in Morocco.  In other countries, the share of respondents indicating that they worked remotely is lower, in particular in Ghana (37%), Cambodia (22%) and Kazakhstan (29%). Worth noting that cross-country comparisons should be interpreted with care. They might stem partially from differences in survey samples across countries (e.g., education employees are significantly less likely to work remotely), differences in question wording, language or questions fielded. What seems clear is that most of the public officials who worked remotely want to continue doing so at least part of the time after the pandemic – for instance 94%, 89% and 59% of those who had worked remotely in Chile, Colombia and Cambodia.

If governments are going to provide the option of working from home, and many officials are going to take it up at least some of the time, how do we best manage government from the kitchen table?

First, they need to have choices, as not everyone enjoyed being stuck at home while managing their families, or on their own. Most public employees feel that their wellbeing and productivity are not adversely affected by remote working. 🐦 But there is a minority who have suffered from being physically away from the office. For instance, some staff felt anxious or stressed about working from home, ranging from 45% (Chile) to 32% (Kazakhstan). Allowing officials to make choices about where to work from will provide a safety net for those who prefer not to work from home.

Such a safety net matters because **some institutions manage working remotely much more effectively than others**. For instance, the share of public employees who feel anxious or stressed working from home varies across government institutions in Colombia (16% to 42%), and state institutions in Chile (25%-58%) and Kazakhstan (20%-49%). **This implies that there will be an ongoing role for a centre-of-government office to independently assess the welfare of public officials**. Where institutional management is failing to support staff at home, senior management should be brought to account. As engagement at work has become an increasingly common part of the performance assessment of organisational management, managerial efforts to support remote work and its interaction with in-person work should be tracked, judged and rewarded.

So as the world's public officials move, or trudge, back to their offices, we need a new set of incentives for public sector managers whose job is to keep government running in its now disparate organisational state. Without changing incentives of management in a way that confronts their new reality, the public service will find adjustment to a hybrid model a painful one. Most people have not had to shape an organisational mission across a hybrid work environment and now they must.

Read more in [part 2](#).

Editor's note: This blog post is part of a series for the 'Bureaucracy Lab', a World Bank initiative to better understand the world's public officials. It is the first of a two-part series on return from telework in government.

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