

BUSINESS / CORONAVIRUS**LI firms rethinking the 5-day office workweek**

Long Island businesses say telecommuting required by the COVID-19 pandemic will likely have a permanent impact on day-to-day operations. Credit: Newsday / Alejandra Villa Loarca; Morgan Campbell

By Laura Albanese

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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 workweek will become a thing of the past.

In a Newsday survey of over 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 commute, and the ability to recruit talent from outside the immediate geographical area. Detractors, meanwhile, believe 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 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.’”



Christine Ippolito, founder of Compass Workforce Solutions in Hauppauge, believes many companies will be moving to a hybrid model where some days are spent working from home and others in the office. Credit: Newsday / Alejandra Villa Loarca

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 since they can’t give them raises,” 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 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 they'll also shift to a hybrid model.

"Technology has enabled us 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."

Added Eric Foodim, COO of PrestigePEO, a Melville-based human resources firm: "It improves morale and the culture of the organization as a whole now that there is this flexibility, so these are changes that are going to be permanent. No doubt about it."

Expert urges caution

Still, companies should be extremely 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 specifically concerned about companies making rash decisions in direct reaction to the pandemic. And though she's a proponent of the hybrid model, she believes companies that primarily have been office-based in the past need to ease into it.

Companies "need to be socking away 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 Farmingdale-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 a harmful one. "There are people who live alone, so their only socialization comes from being in the workplace." Isolation, he said, is a "dangerous, dangerous thing."



FutureTech CEO Bob Venero prefers an in-office model. "I'm a big fan of ... looking someone in the eye and shaking their hand," he said. Credit: Morgan Campbell

Bob Venero, CEO and founder of Future Tech, a Holbrook IT solutions company, was extremely cautious at the outset 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 Maine-based remote employee and could foresee going that route for certain job titles that allow it.

Sometimes, employees 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.

The 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, envision potentially 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 that both his employees and people he's networked with don't seem eager to return to the office.



Christopher Ulrich, founder of Direct Response Group, envisions possibly eliminating the office altogether. "People like not commuting," he said. Credit: Newsday / John Paraskevas

The website design and marketing company has five employees that 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 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 Associated 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 new lesson in how we work

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 and they're also more efficient...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 tristate area because now you can recruit talent nationally." They, too, are examining a hybrid model, since they found their workforce to be "very, very productive" during the stay-at-home order. Employees who prove they can hit their benchmarks will likely get the opportunity to continue some form of remote work.

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

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

Reevaluating old ways of doing things

Even companies that never envisioned telecommuting as a viable, long-term option are now considering it due to the success they had.

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.

A vast majority said that meetings, at least, will be transformed by the lessons learned during COVID-19. "I've had people say to me, I can't imagine driving from meeting to meeting again," said Linda Armyn, senior vice president at Bethpage Federal Credit Union.

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, but that's currently on hold. They're in the process of assessing employee efficiency to determine to what extent they can allow remote work 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.

Metro Physical and Aquatic Therapy was also looking to get more office space pre-COVID, but that’s no longer the case, said Dr. Michael Mayrsohn, chief executive officer. The firm even developed a new product line, the rehab box, that allows patients to continue with their treatment plans while staying at home.

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, cyber security 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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