The social sector:
How will workplaces change post-pandemic?

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Nakia James-Jenkins
Partner, On-Ramps

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Introduction

With 2020 in the rear-view mirror and Covid-19 vaccinations starting to gain traction, we've been thinking a lot about what lasting impacts the events of last year will have on social sector workplaces. What does returning to the office look like for nonprofits, mission-driven businesses, and other organizations—and when will it happen? What's going to be different about our work environments, and what—if anything—will stay the same? So we asked the mission-driven organizations in our circle.

In navigating this new remote workstyle, it appears the sector has been thinking deeply about how to reimagine and redesign organizational growth. The results include a wide variety of creative, tangible changes to policies and practices that allow for greater flexibility for their staff—both in how they work and how they grow. Of course, this looks different for every organization and role. Some jobs and fields better lend themselves to flexibility in scheduling and location than others. But we have seen a genuine effort across the social sector to provide employees with the support they need to thrive.

And it looks like much of this is here to stay. Not only because these new creative changes and additional support systems will get organizations through this pandemic, but also because they established a more flexible, empathic, and human-centered workplace. Organizations excel when their most valuable assets—their people—are given the necessary tools to reach their full potential, regardless of location.

Post-pandemic, social sector office life won't be what it was before.

Even after this pandemic is behind us, remote work will remain an essential part of moving forward for many organizations. Over the past nine months, 71% of the organizations who responded to our survey added or expanded on company policies to allow for remote work in the future. And most notably, the vast majority of these (83%) plan to maintain those expanded policies when returning to the office.

Nearly half (48%) of respondents have elected to make working on-site 100% optional for some or all of their staff post-pandemic, and 39% of organizations want to downsize or give up their office space altogether. This would suggest that remote work is working, for both employees and organizations.

Only 6.5% of our respondents reported they will require full-time on-site work, post-pandemic.

Nearly half of respondents are making working on-site 100% optional for some or all of their staff, indefinitely.

## What are some of the biggest changes your organization has made due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

■ Changes organizations have made in past 9 months
■ Changes organizations are planning to maintain post-pandemic

Adjusting standard working hours to be more flexible
77.4%
51.7%

Increasing company-wide communication from leadership
77.4%
69%

Increasing opportunities for employees to connect with each other
77.4%
72.4

Adding or expanding on company policies to allow for remote work in the future
71%
82.8%

Restructuring hiring and/or onboarding processes
64.5%
52.5%

Adding more PTO days or other forms of time off
41.9%
27.6%

Incorporating more wellness practices into company benefits
38.7%
37.9%

Cutting back on internal meetings
32.3%
6.9%

Cutting back on external meetings
16.1%
0%

Social sector organizations are restructuring the workday to better support the realities of remote life.

Changes to workday protocols and policies that responders cited fall into three categories.

1. Integrating more flexibility, transparency, and connection into day-to-day work life
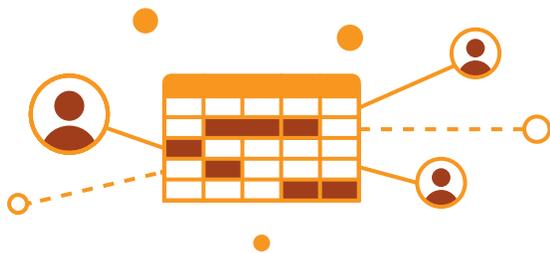
The forced move to remote teams brings with it a redefining of the traditional work day. The realities of remote life—managing child care, unexpected interruptions, isolation, the loss of work-life separation, lack of in-person forms of communication, etc.—has struck a pain point that may have always been right under the surface: work-life balance.

The respondents in our survey have been creative in their strategies for supporting employees' mental health, team unity, and overall wellness throughout this pandemic.

Over the past nine months, nearly all organizations who responded to our survey made three big changes to their work day practices:

- Adjusting standard working hours to be more flexible

- Increasing company-wide communication from leadership

- Increasing opportunities for employees to connect with each other

These changes allow employees to adapt in a way that works for their individual circumstances. One respondent noted, "We've allowed staff to carve out or adjust time in their days depending on dependent care needs, to go off-camera for some meetings to move around or multi-task at home, and to create clear boundaries around non-work time so that we can truly step away from our work even though we're still all home."

We implemented half-day Fridays early on in COVID.

— *survey responder*

2. Redesigning Friday as the day to reset
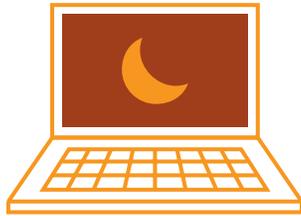
There was one approach to easing virtual burnout that came up again and again among respondents: Friday as a freer day.

The variations of this idea ran the gamut, including:

- Closing the virtual office at 2:00 or 3:00pm every Friday
- No emails after noon on Fridays
- Designating every other Friday as free from internal meetings
- Instituting half-day Fridays

One organization noted, "We implemented half-day Fridays early on in COVID to allow our teammates to take the time and space they needed, either for their own wellness and self care, or to block their calendars and catch up on work without any meetings."

Moving forward, perhaps we'll see a more standard, "two-and-a-half-day weekend," in which Fridays can swing between productivity for work or self.

3. Increasing employee wellness initiatives

With the lines increasingly blurred between home and work life, what seemed to be a focus for many respondents were simple wellness initiatives and reminders to encourage employees to step away from their monitors and recharge.

One organization closed their office for a week in the spring to give employees time and space to unplug. They plan to do the same again this coming spring. Another organization increased their company-wide emails from the Executive Director to once a week, and introduced a new semi-monthly regional staff newsletter to highlight wellness resources.

Another organization decided to dedicate one day a week to wellness—"Wellness Wednesdays"—during which "staff are encouraged to block off a section of their calendar for self-care—a walk, a lunch without work distractions, a phone call with a friend or colleague, etc. One Wednesday a month we also bring in someone from our EAP [employee assistance program] for a 15-minutes session on a specific wellness topic. And schedule an hour in the afternoon of either art therapy, meditation, bagua, or some other wellness practice."

> *Our staff are encouraged to block off a section of their calendar for self-care.*
>
> — *survey responder*

Organizations are reimagining how growth is measured.

In line with redefining the traditional work day, social sector organizations are finding they need to move away from standardized evaluation processes. In our survey, 65% of respondents are restructuring their performance evaluation criteria with the rise of remote work.

One organization noted, "Having an individualized approach allows us to address needs as they arise and also learn from one another's best practices."

And this is true beyond the pandemic. The organizations we surveyed expect to retain these new evaluation systems long term if they perform well. Keeping performance, "less about accountability and more about what we are learning as individuals and as an organization" is a shift in mindset catalyzed by the pandemic work environment, but, we think, long awaited by employees and growth-minded organizations alike.

How are you addressing managers' leadership styles and expectations with the rise of remote work?

Restructuring performance evaluation criteria or processes
65.2%

Providing new or different ongoing support, such as regular discussion sessions, access to coaches or third-party consultants, etc.
56.5%

Creating a new training program to help managers adapt
39.1%

> *Performance evaluations are less about accountability and more about what we are learning as individuals and as an organization.*
>
> — *survey responder*

In conclusion

The biggest takeaway from our data is a focus on flexibility. Flexibility in work days, in locations, in evaluation methods, in employee support, etc.

What does returning to the office look like, and when will it happen? It will look different for each organization and individual. It will happen in the way that fosters the greatest growth both for the organization and its employees. For many, there will not be a return to the office.

What's going to be different about our work environments, and what—if anything—will stay the same? Organizations in the social sector have, and always will, work hard every day for the communities they serve. However, moving forward, that work and the environments in which it takes place will likely continue to deviate from the traditional mold.

From On-Ramps' perspective, we've been anticipating many of these changes for a while and have seen the social sector slowly inch toward them. We were pleased to see the steps organizations in our circle boldly took to prioritize their people and communities throughout these unprecedented times. We believe other sectors will soon follow suit as they see these changes play out well for growth and bottom lines as well.