The Potential Impact of Work-From-Home on Newsrooms

Mary Meehan
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About

About the author

Mary Meehan is a veteran reporter who most recently worked the health beat at the Ohio Valley ReSource, an NPR regional collaborative covering the states of Kentucky, West Virginia, and Ohio in the United States.

Born in Kentucky, a winner of dozens of state, regional, and national journalism awards, Mary has covered exploding hotels, trashed trailers, epic ER wait times, Salem the Wonder Cat, and one Santa convention in Branson, Mo. As a 2016 Nieman Fellow at Harvard University, Mary studied digital journalism and the challenge of using public health policy to create sustainable social change. She is familiar with working remotely, having worked solely as a freelance writer for a decade. Her work has appeared in National Geographic Online, the Columbia Journalism Review, Nieman Reports, and many other outlets.

You can also check her out on Twitter and Instagram @TheMaryMeehan.

About the International News Media Association (INMA)

The International News Media Association (INMA) is a global community of market-leading news media companies reinventing how they engage audiences and grow revenue in a multi-media environment. The INMA community consists of 13,000+ members at 850+ news media companies in 70 countries. Headquartered in Dallas, INMA has offices in Antwerp, New Delhi, and San Salvador. Celebrating its 90th anniversary, INMA is the news media industry’s foremost ideas-sharing network with members connected via conferences, reports, Webinars, virtual meetings, and an unparalleled archive of best practices.
During the first four months of the COVID-19 lockdowns, media jobs in the United States were slashed at such a fast pace it was hard to keep track. Respected chroniclers of news trends — including the Poynter Institute and Nieman Reports — were trying, with mixed results, to keep accurate daily tallies.

Most newsrooms essentially told employees to “go home” and tried to simply carry on. Soon some were calculating savings if employees kept working in their homes.

Research shows remote work can be effective, and there are best practices such as creating a specific, designated workspace and keeping a regular schedule. But research also shows that simply shifting production location without cultural and structural change is not sustainable.

Deliberate action is needed, but could be overlooked in this instance because of the way the shift to remote work so dramatically evolved.

No one knew how long people would need to work on their couch or at the kitchen table. The best practices of making remote work a success didn’t seem important if the situation was just going to last a couple of weeks.

At first, many media leaders acted as they always had when big news breaks — putting all hands on deck and finding a way to get things done. There is trauma in covering a plane crash or a hurricane destroying communities. For those examples, there is both a framework for coverage and an end of the emergency.

That is not the case in 2020. There has never been an ongoing news story with such dire impacts on the economy, the news companies as a whole, and employees
individually. Add to that cramped spaces, home schooling, and health fears, and what we have is an under-discussed trauma — not just among news organisations but across industries.

The trauma of covering such an ongoing catastrophe has real health impacts, both mental and physical. In the long run, that can impact the quality of the work and the company's bottom line. In best practice, news companies would address the additional stress through additional and innovative employee assistance programmes.

After all, remote work may be our future.

McClatchy is notably embracing remote work. Seven newsrooms, including The Miami Herald, will be shuttered by August. Employees have been told to expect to stay home until at least the end of 2020. Shedding office expenses is part of handling the company's Chapter 11 bankruptcy and recent sale to Chatham Asset Management. Many expect the move to be permanent. The next step is likely replacing big, open spaces with smaller, less expensive real estate, perhaps with staggered schedules and shared space.

If this shift to remote work is permanent, the industry needs to take decisive action to succeed. There must be a cultural shift in support of the drastic physical move.

“The Potential Impact of WFH on Newsrooms” takes a look at U.S. newsrooms, information that can be extrapolated out to much of the rest of the world. Some key takeaways from this report include:

1. **Remote work works**: Studies show remote working can be effective and, in some cases, even improves the quality of the product and morale of workers.

2. **Clear directions are required**: Rules for working from home need to be created and shared with employees. For example, no emailing after midnight or no overtime unless pre-approved. Old policies need to be reviewed and tweaked to make sure they still apply and are functional in a new normal.

3. **Prepare for the unexpected**: New human resources challenges need to be anticipated. What is the consequence when, to cite a real-world example, a reporter is on air or in a Zoom meeting and a nude woman walks through his shot?
4. **Standards of conduct are required:** When everyone can see and hear whatever you are doing, what is considered acceptable needs to be clear. In this new world, people may not know how distracting their behaviour may be. (Example: “Dave, you just can’t eat cereal during the news meeting with your audio on.”)

5. **Define/equip home office:** The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in the United States has said it will not be inspecting home offices, but some OSHA rules may still apply. Companies need to discuss what the “home office” entails and at least initially offer some assistance in helping employees create appropriate work space.

6. **Training pays off:** Upfront training is essential. Employees well versed in company software and publishing systems may be less familiar with tools like Slack, Zoom, or Google Docs. Training and responsive on-call IT assistance will reduce frustration by employees and improve long-term efficiency.

7. **Equipment parity is needed:** If we are all Zooming all the time, the quality of audio and video equipment will matter. It is prudent to explore a unified standard of audio and video technology. Not doing this would be equal to giving one employee a laptop and another an electric typewriter.

8. **Access to Wi-Fi supports diversity:** Addressing the issue of access to consistent, quality Wi-Fi becomes a question of diversity and inclusion. Urban and rural areas more often suffer from low access.

9. **Cultural shift is possible:** The most successful media leaders will be empathetic and flexible, and will fight against any tendency to micro-manage. Discussion about individual challenges and solutions will be important. The best leaders will also foster employee-to-employee contact, such as dedicated Slack channels, to help sustain a supportive and creative — if remote — culture.
Foreword

When INMA was pitched on a report about how the work-from-home revolution in the first six months of 2020 could potentially impact U.S. newsrooms, my first reaction was "too focused on one country" and "too focused on one department of a news company."

Then I read the report.

Author Mary Meehan has put her finger on the pulse of some likely serious ramifications of WFH that are being discussed across industries, but never brought home to media companies. INMA in recent years has attempted to elevate H.R., people management, talent acquisition and retention, and culture-related matters to a higher, strategic level.

Mary has thoughtfully achieved this in “The Potential Impact of Work-From-Home on Newsrooms” — allowing us to bend our normal practices and narrowcast a subject nationally for the benefit of all INMA members worldwide.

Here is what you will take away by reading this report:

1. **Leadership**: A broad overview of the leadership, management, H.R., and practical implications of work-from-home. Be prepared to benchmark your efforts with the data and case studies contained herein.

2. **What employees need remotely**: The training, technology, and skill sets needed by employees to navigate WFH. There are nuances beyond providing a computer and turning it on. Are we assuming as leaders that this is easy for everyone? Spoiler alert: It isn’t.
3. **Managing remote workers:** Managing work/home and work/family balance, how to overcome social isolation, the potential new covenant emerging between management and employees, and management tips for people working remotely.

If you are serious about people and talent management during this COVID Moment, spend some time with this smart report. Challenge your H.R. team whether your WFH plan measures up. The report may be focused on the newsroom, yet it applies to all departments.

How media companies get work done may never be the same thanks to this pandemic. I hope this report advances knowledge about WFH.

Earl J. Wilkinson  
Executive Director and CEO  
International News Media Association (INMA)  
30 July 2020
Media companies, like counterparts across industries, moved quickly to get employees into the relative safety of the family den when the coronavirus emerged as a highly contagious threat in early 2020.

Before the pandemic, 2.5% of U.S. employees teleworked full-time, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta. Pretty quickly, almost everyone who can work remotely carved out some home office space.

According to an April Gallup Poll, 62% of employees said their employers were offering remote working options and that number had doubled in a month. It appears this trend will continue.

Executives at about 1,750 firms from a variety of industries across the United States expect 10% of full-time employees to telework every workday after the pandemic ends, according to the May monthly panel survey by economists at the Atlanta Fed, Stanford University, and the University of Chicago.

Executives expect 30% of their workforce to work remotely at least one day per week after the pandemic, triple the previous rate. With remote employees lacking the easy camaraderie and support of co-workers, media managers will need to fill that void in a way that hasn’t always been at the center of the hard-charging culture of media companies.

There are broader yet unanswered questions. According to Pew Research, one in five U.S. newsroom employees live in New York, Los Angeles, or Washington, D.C., making those cities home to a disproportionately large share of American journalists.
These areas, by comparison, are home to 13% of all U.S. workers, according to a Center analysis of Census Bureau data covering 2013 to 2017.

If media employees can work from home, will they continue choosing to live in some of the most expensive housing markets in the United States? If work-from-home is the new normal, will the very shape and size of homes need to adapt?

Finally, if we will be meeting in the ether moving forward, will the fuzzy, glitchy, badly lit Zoom conference of 2020 stand as the norm? Will news companies be required to provide all employees with cameras and laptops of equal caliber, along with tips on, for instance, not sitting in front of a window if you want people to see your face, not just the wild shadow of your current quarantine hair?

There are hopeful signs. Some media companies have been all remote, all the time for a while. Upworthy, for example, has only remote staff. Storyful editors say they benefit from having people covering news across time zones.
And even legacy media has long had effective remote staff: the sports desk.

But remote work is not just a simple matter of telling people to go home.

“Companies should never just implement telecommuting without changing anything else,” said industrial organisational psychologist Kristen Shockley, Ph.D., an associate professor at the University of Georgia, in a 2019 article published by the American Psychology Association. “They also need to shift their culture and norms to support the new arrangement.”

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One-fifth of newsroom employees live in metro areas

% of U.S. employed adults by metro area, 2013-2017

Washington D.C. metro area

Los Angeles metro area

New York metro area

Based on population ages 18 and older employed in the civilian labour force. Source: Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Public Use Microdata Sample file
New policies, support mechanisms, and legalities

In a few short months in 2020, the physical landscape of working America — and the entire world — has changed dramatically and, for many, the change may be permanent. This may require new policies, WFH support mechanisms, and even some legal considerations for news media companies.

A. Work-from-home policies

Some unique human resources challenges are already apparent.

For example, an Italian journalist was on a Zoom call when a nearly naked woman casually walked through the background frame. Since that very rarely happens in a newsroom, is a new human resources policy necessary for such unintended consequences?

There are even such basic Zoom or conference etiquette issues that are routinely ignored, such as muting your microphone if you intend to have a nice crispy bowl of cereal while making a plan for the day. One widely accepted rule of thumb is if you wouldn’t do it in person, you shouldn’t do it in a Zoom or conference call.

The basics of Zoom etiquette haven’t changed much since the Zoom Blog published a pre-pandemic list of do’s and don’t’s in 2019. But an earlier post circa 2013 that suggested business attire seems almost quaint in an age where wild quarantine beards and hair are now sometimes a badge of honour.

Those may be lighthearted examples, but there are serious concerns about meeting Occupational Safety Health Administration (OSHA) standards in the United States, offering equitable work equipment and work spaces, and addressing issues of
adequate access to broadband that could hamper the ability to work remotely for employees in both rural and urban areas.

Still, as media companies move into these uncharted waters, policies should be put in place and communicated clearly to employees.

B. Work-from-home support

Experts also say the best practices will require support beyond traditional newsroom management. There should be plans made for proper equipment and emotional support and outreach in a way that is not always the norm in the hard-charging atmosphere of media companies. Flexibility and empathy will be needed from both managers and their employees for things to work well.
In interviewing people making the changes and reviewing literature and research on the subject of remote working, it seems clear that the worst mistake any company could make is assuming remote news operations can thrive with a simple shift of where desks are located.

We all have a shared painful example of a similar failure in recent memory: Many newsrooms thought online journalism was just switching the print product to the Web.

A similar mistake with evolving remote work can be avoided, even in this hectic time. It will take some imagination and creativity once basic morale boosters like a company picnic or a bonus have long disappeared.

But managers should seriously consider how to provide support and inspiration such as virtual check-ins, group lunches, H.R./benefits Q&A, and virtual happy hours. One Upworthy editor found employees enjoy stress-relieving specialty Slack channels, like one dedicated mostly to cat discussions and feline memes.

Dutch researchers found two types of leadership: task-oriented and relationship-oriented. In a remote working environment, they concluded, “relationship-oriented leadership behaviours are especially advantageous.”

The reasoning is that “in a teleworking environment, direct co-worker support and empathy may not be available, and subordinates may then have a greater need for considerate behaviour from their leaders.”

“When managers ignore emotional culture, they’re glossing over a vital part of what makes people — and organisations — tick.”

— Harvard Business Review
While the world seems to be upside down, this quote from the January/February 2016 Harvard Business Review still seems appropriate: “When managers ignore emotional culture, they’re glossing over a vital part of what makes people — and organisations — tick.”

**C. Case study: WFPL**

Ashlee Clark is digital editor for WFPL in Louisville, the National Public Radio (NPR) affiliate in Kentucky’s biggest city.

Like a lot of news organisations, WFPL quickly had as many people as possible working from home when the coronavirus shutdowns began. Most people had the equipment they needed on hand, Clark said, but some inventive problem-solving was required when they needed a studio for recording stories to broadcast.

“There were a couple of days that people were making makeshift offices or studios, whether it is going into a closet or whatever quiet place,” she said.

While WFPL occasionally runs text-only stories on its Web site, the focus is still on radio. And finding ways to get quality audio was a main concern: “Generally that was our biggest concern, that we could still put it on the radio.”

Management started making plans for remote work as soon as the first cases were arriving in the United States, Clark said. “Precautions were in place before it got really bad.”

“**So we all are a business, even if it is a non-profit. If your reporters are not doing well personally, you cannot do that mission. You can’t do that without taking in consideration the well-being of people out front. We have to work through.**

— Ashlee Clark, Digital Director, WFPL
Human resources even sent out a survey asking if employees had the technology they needed to do their work. The majority said they had what they needed.

“For me, seeing the staff adapt so quickly was amazing,” she said. In addition, there were some inventive fixes like using broomsticks or vacuum cleaner parts to lengthen the reach of a microphone.

But just as the staff was starting to get in a COVID groove, Breonna Taylor was killed on March 13, 2020, by Louisville Metro Police. Taylor was an African-American emergency medical technician (EMT) who was shot in her apartment when police entered under a no-knock warrant at the wrong address.

The protests erupted and continued daily for weeks. Every part of the team was involved in the coverage of the often chaotic events. Slack turned out to be a good tool to keep things running smoothly, Clark said.

Few people were in the downtown building, which had a window smashed in the early days of the protests. Most, Clark said, used the office primarily as a rest stop before going out into the field.

**Louisville protests continued daily for weeks**

Protests that erupted during the pandemic have contributed to the challenges and stress for reporters who are adjusting to a remote work environment.
WFPL also tried to set boundaries with the staff about not working too much, but left it up to the individual about what that might look like. Someone may need time in the afternoon with their kids. Others worked better late at night.

“It’s largely been up to the individual to handle when they see fit,” she said. It’s also important to know an individual’s work style. Some people who are off will answer a message. Some will not.

“It is about your individual relationship with them,” Clark said. “I think for us, one of the things that was noticeable — we had a reporter who saw a man get shot 10 feet away from them — we have to watch the mental well-being, too.”

“The nature of news is we can’t turn it off,” she said, but managers could encourage staffers to take time off or take a break. They are encouraging people to work in pairs and check on one another. “To put it bluntly, she said, “We have to look out for one another because we are covering some shit.”

WFPL President and General Manager Stephen George helps set the tone by offering everyone a mental health day, no questions asked.

“So we all are a business, even if it is a non-profit,” Clark said. “If your reporters are not doing well personally, you cannot do that mission. You can’t do that without taking in consideration the well-being of people out front. We have to work through.”

When the time is right, the WFPL crew will likely return to the building, Clark said, but they will carry with them the lessons they learned through their remote collaboration.
WFH legal considerations

Here are some potential legal issues from Karla Grossenbacher, partner at Seyfarth Shaw LLP and a member of its COVID-19 task force. She presented during a recent Webinar by America’s Newspapers and offered these tips:

- Create a remote working policy, even if just temporary. If someone is not performing properly, you will have a policy for handling that.

- Be sure you know when an employee is working and how to get in touch with them.

- Be clear about scheduled hours for non-exempt employees. Put the policy in writing stating that they are not to work beyond scheduled hours without prior written authorisation. (If a remote worker works overtime, they have to be paid for it whether or not it was authorised.)

- OSHA has a general policy that employers must ensure remote workplaces are safe. It has also said it won’t be inspecting home work spaces used for office-type work as opposed to, for example, sewing clothes at home.

- Workers’ compensation can apply to work-at-home sites, but there can be an issue of whether the injury was related to work.

- Keeping confidences is critical, especially among new remote workers. Employees likely will be using personal and unsecured Wi-Fi and software. They may not be shredding confidential papers, but simply putting them out with the garbage. Be sure to have a policy that lays out the hazards of handling confidential data and information.
CHAPTER 3

A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity or total annihilation?

In the midst of such rapid change, media companies are having to adjust to a landscape that is changing at a dizzying pace. In addition to the effects on the physical space employees work in, there are severe financial implications and technological limitations. News media companies are forced to create new policies and make critical decisions even as they wonder what the new normal will ultimately look like.

A. What “total annihilation” looks like

The coronavirus has accelerated the number of media companies slashing staff or moving out of office space. It is happening at such a fast pace that companies dedicated to covering the media are having a difficult time keeping track of what’s happening where. It also produced the strange phenomenon of news companies reporting on the cuts and changes at other news companies while often staying quiet about whatever changes may be happening within their own ranks.

The Poynter Institute’s running and ever-growing list of updates shows about 600 American journalists laid off through the end of June. The Communication Workers of America said the number was closer to 1,000. Some layoffs hit local outlets especially hard. The Honolulu Star-Advertiser, the largest newspaper in the state of Hawaii, announced the newsroom staff would be cut in half, with 31 people losing their jobs.

At the same time, the Nieman Journalism Lab at Harvard University is reporting the financial havoc the virus has wrought on the revenue streams of free alternative weekly newspapers. These publications are especially hard hit because of their
heavy dependence on coverage and advertising from concerts, nightlife, and bars — which were shut down. Nieman Lab Director Joshua Benton wrote originally about several struggling alternative weeklies. Two days later, more than a dozen additional imperiled media outlets were added to the list. The headline referenced “Total Annihilation.” Some, Benton noted, are asking for financial support from readers. But that is a tricky proposition because most are for-profit and any contributions would not be tax deductible.

Benton points out that alternative weeklies not only lost a key source of revenue such as fees from events such as concerts. They also lost their distribution sites.

“Where do you pick up an alt-weekly?” he writes. “At a bar, at a restaurant, at a theater — all the places that have gone dark.”

**B. Case study: Skift’s B2B publication**

Some publications decided earlier than others to abandon their current physical spaces.

Skift, publisher of B2B, which focused on the travel industry, announced in late May that it was giving up its Manhattan office space. The lease expires on July 31. Founder and CEO Rafat Ali told Folio the plan will save about US$600,000 a year.

Skift’s events business accounted for about 40% of revenues in 2018 and 2019. The company has been operating with approximately two-thirds of its former staff since

> Business operators are realising this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance of resetting your cost base.

— Rafat Ali, CEO and Founder, Skift
March, when it furloughed about 20 employees. Since then, the company was forced to let those staffers go, Folio reported on its Web site.

The shift to an entirely remote model was something the company was “heavily considering” as early as April, according to Digiday, in addition to other earlier measures like implementing a hiring freeze, shifting to virtual events, and soliciting contributions from readers and Webinar attendees to support its journalism in lieu of a metered paywall.

“Business operators are realising this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance of resetting your cost base,” Ali told AdExchanger last month. “This is true across all industries, not just in travel, not just in media.”

Ali later tweeted that there would be a reset not only in base costs but language. “We’re dropping the word ‘remote’ internally, we are now a connected company. Playing with words helps change the mindset, gimmicky or not. We shouldn’t aspire to be a remote company, we are just a … company — a connected, distributed one with real humans not remote from each other, etc. You get the drift. It starts to unlock more creative juices, at least for us as we figure this out together with our team.”

C. Big Tech transitions

It makes sense that tech giants such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter have told employees to plan on teleworking through 2020. Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey said this in an e-mail to staff, as confirmed by TechCrunch:

“I don’t think we are going to come back out of this and be back where we were before all this started.”

— Sundar Pichai, CEO, Google
“We were uniquely positioned to respond quickly and allow folks to work from home given our emphasis on decentralisation and supporting a distributed workforce capable of working from anywhere. The past few months have proven we can make that work. So if our employees are in a role and situation that enables them to work from home and they want to continue to do so forever, we will make that happen. If not, our offices will be their warm and welcoming selves, with some additional precautions, when we feel it’s safe to return.”

Remote working is currently working well, Google CEO Sundar Pichai said. But, as he told Wired, “I don’t think we are going to come back out of this and be back where we were before all this started.”

He is especially concerned about how creative collaborations on new projects might work in a remote-work environment.

“I’m curious to see what happens as we get into that three- to six-month window and we get into things where we are doing something for the first time.” Pichai said. “How productive will we be when different teams who don’t normally work together have to come together for brainstorming, the creative process? We are going to have research, surveys, learn from data, learn what works.”

Unlike legacy media, Pichai doesn’t think Google’s giant campus under way in Mountain View or a building renovation in New York need to be amended. “In all scenarios, I expect us to need physical spaces to get people together, absolutely,” Pichair told Wired. “We have a lot of growth planned ahead. So even if there is some course correction, I don’t think our existing footprint is going to be the issue.”

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg told his employees in a video message that up to 50% of its 48,000 employees could be working remotely in the next five to 10 years. As the offices opened on July 6, capacity was limited to 25%, so many employees will continue remotely for some time.

According to Protocol, Facebook will also reimburse employees for Internet upgrade costs while they are stuck at home, and the company will pay for home office accessories people need. A spokesperson told the media outlet there is no specific stipend set aside. Employees can request what they need through their normal internal tools and have it shipped to their homes. Facebook is also distributing Facebook Portal devices for easier video chats to employees that request them, according to a spokesperson.
Twitter communicated to employees through the Twitter Blog, encouraging them to work at home and explaining what assistance is available. Twitter is stepping in to ease additional expenses parents may be experiencing when their normal daycare closes due to COVID-19 by providing reimbursement for the additional daycare expenses. All employees, including hourly workers, will receive reimbursement toward their home office expenses. That includes home office equipment such as desks, desk chairs, and ergonomic chair cushions.

Twitter officials went on to say: "Last year, we introduced #FlockTalk, a programme activated when Tweeps want to come together during difficult times to share what’s going on with them, find community, and be heard by our leaders. News around COVID-19 is impacting people in a number of different ways — from schools and offices being closed, to serious health concerns, to racism towards communities. We’re all dealing with a lot. The Twitter Inclusion & Diversity team (@TwitterTogether) in partnership with @TwitterAsians will host a virtual #FlockTalk that acknowledges there’s a direct correlation between conversations between us, the health of our workplace, and the health of our service."

It is a little ironic that these tech companies were quick out of the gate to send employees home since their elaborate campuses are packed with amenities like dry
cleaning, free lunches, medical and dental services, and onsite gyms designed to keep employees as close to their desks as possible.

But the different approaches raise some questions: What kind of support will news media companies supply for their workers? And how will they pay for it?

That may be one of the questions answered by the Journalism Crisis Project announced in June by the Columbia Journalism Review and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, both at the Columbia Journalism School.

D. Case study: Cox Media Group

David Collins was ahead of the curve when it comes to promoting remote work. Back in 2012 when Collins took a job with Cox Media Group, his task was to combine copy editors and designers into hubs in Dayton, Ohio, and West Palm Beach, Florida.

The task was a challenge in the beginning.

“Very, very few people were willing to relocate,” he said. Plus, the work on the desk was hard. One hub served seven newsrooms, and staff had to understand multiple content management systems. It got to the point that the pool of candidates was thin even for a relatively high-paying job.

“"It is a way to save a ton of money. Workers see it as a huge positive.”

— David Collins, Associate Editor, Cox Media Group
Then Collins had an idea. He knew an excellent copy editing candidate who had just left The Orlando Sentinel. She was one of the best in the business. Collins convinced his boss to let him hire the woman and allow her to work from home part-time.

There were some technical hoops to jump through. Collins initially thought the woman could just use her home computer, but the IT department had other ideas. They didn’t want a part-timer installing the company software on her computer, so they sent her a computer fully loaded and ready to go. Even then, Collins said, “there were a lot of protocols” that had to be established.

There was also some resistance by local editors against remote workers and hubs. The feeling was that people unfamiliar with a community wouldn’t be able to catch the nuances that locals could.

But, Collins said, the woman quickly proved to be so skilled his boss gave him the green light to hire the best candidate no matter where they lived. Other advantages immediately came to light: A copy editor in Boise, Idaho, didn’t mind working what would be considered a late shift in Florida because of the time zone differences.

As the hub idea grew, Collins found himself managing not only employees across the United States but around the world. He kept a handle on things by requiring every team member to write him an end-of-shift note detailing what they did. Collins also found teams communicated differently and he needed to adapt. It is a small thing, he said, but the team in the Philippines liked to add emojis in text conversations. It seemed to help forge a bond within the group.

For the last two years, Collins has been associate editor of Villages Daily Sun. He endorses the trend toward remote work. “It is a way to save a ton of money,” he said. “Workers see it as a huge positive.”

Even the lack of a commute, he said, can add an extra 90 minutes for family or other interests: “That matters a lot to people.” ■
While all companies (and all industries) have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic, they may be finding different ways to manage it -- and may have very different results. Looking to what other companies are doing -- and what has worked in the past -- can offer clues on where to go from here.

A. What WFH looks like for McClatchy

In what some considered a surprise move, McClatchy announced in mid-June it is moving out of its newsrooms in Miami, Charlotte, Washington, D.C., Columbia (South Carolina), and in three California markets: Modesto, Merced, and San Luis Obispo. The moves are expected by August.

“From pandemic to protests, we haven’t skipped a beat thanks to technology, communication tools that connect us instantaneously and the hard work of our dedicated staff.”

— Aminda Marqués González, President, Publisher and Executive Editor, Miami Herald and El Nuevo Herald
In a note to readers, Aminda Marqués González, president, publisher and executive editor of the Miami Herald and El Nuevo Herald and regional director of McClatchy’s Florida news operations, said, “Since mid-March, most of us have been working from home. From pandemic to protests, we haven’t skipped a beat thanks to technology, communication tools that connect us instantaneously and the hard work of our dedicated staff.”

Charlotte Observer executive editor Sherry Chisenhall said: “Since mid-March, our team has worked effectively from home while providing vital local news coverage in our community. Our journalists have covered two ongoing major news stories, reporting on the pandemic and massive protests of racial inequity nearly around the clock, seven days a week.”

Poynter’s Senior Media Writer Tom Jones wrote about the change: “The goal: to save costs and prioritise jobs over cubicles. That could be key for the 30-paper McClatchy chain, which is going through Chapter 11 bankruptcy reorganisation and is expected to be sold.”

Jones’ column quoted a statement from McClatchy: “The pandemic has accelerated our organisation’s need and ability to work remotely. This has led us to look at new ways to find cost savings, including the exit of real estate leases, which our Chapter 11 reorganisation allows. We will exit leases in seven locations and focus our resources where it matters — on saving jobs and delivering on our mission of producing strong, independent local journalism for the communities that we serve.”

The eventual goal is retaining some physical space but on a smaller scale, possibly with staggered work schedules for when the office is used.

Jones wrapped his column by saying, “It’s an experiment that news outlets across the country will be keeping a close eye on, and it could change the business model of newspapers as we now know them.”

There could be a significant wrinkle. News organisations aren’t the only ones considering the savings of diminishing the cost of office space. The U.S. Federal Reserve says it’s too early to know the true impact on the property value. But it makes sense that an abundance of available office space will affect prices.
B. The sports desk

One thing seems to be absent among the research and the media pundits. There is a long-standing section of most newsrooms that has been operating remotely for decades: the sports desk.

Ever since the days of remotely sending text line-by-line with rubber couplers and a landline, sports writers have worked remotely. With late-night games often the norm, many newsrooms rarely saw sports writers in the daylight.

That’s one reason Miami Herald Associate Sports Editor John Devine is not especially concerned about the surge of remote work within his company. Devine said he was surprised at the June announcement, but thinks it is a solid plan.

Many employees were not fans of the commute to the Doral location outside of Miami, he said. Many had been with the company when the headquarters were on the waterfront at Biscayne Bay. The Doral location was more suburban and the traffic, Devine said, was so bad that editors, including himself, often found themselves calling into the 9:00 a.m. news meeting because they were idling on the highway.

Devine is confident his staff will be able to make remote work for them, although there are drawbacks. Zoom is helpful, he said, but it is not quick. It’s not the same as simply walking up to someone’s desk or calling to them from the other side of the

“It’s just a matter of communication. It forces you to make sure you are on the same page.”

— John Devine, Associate Sports Editor, Miami Herald
office. The key, he said, is “just a matter of communication. It forces you to make sure you are on the same page.”

And there are challenges in making sure when you have a family in quarantine that you can find a quiet space. He has a toddler in the house, so he just tries to hide out during required meetings to get the job done.
CHAPTER 5

How to make it work

Although news media companies understand the “what” and “why” of remote working, the aspect they are most struggling with is the “how.” Even for employers who have dabbled in the work-from-home environment, the widespread adoption of a remote workforce presents new challenges both for employees and for the company they work for. Here, we’ll look at some of the key elements of creating a successful remote workforce.

A. Work-life chemistry

For Kari Cobham, the “new normal” is always new but rarely normal.

Some days she feels productive. Other days, not so much. When she physically went to work, she had a 27-mile commute to the Carter Center, where she is the associate director of fellowships and media. She also traveled frequently, often internationally.
Now she’s working from home. And with a 7-year-old and a toddler, family life can seem like a 24/7 job. She is not resigned when she says she’s given up on the idea of a work-life balance. She is pragmatic.

Her goal is work-life chemistry, interweaving competing needs from day to day.

Cobham, who spoke during an April 2020 panel sponsored by the Online News Association’s New York chapter, said everyone has to find and set their own boundaries.

Her one hard and fast rule? She doesn’t do any work in her bedroom. It is her work-free sanctuary, and she needs to have that space.

She also recommends finding one thing you can do every day that brings you joy. For her, that is taking a long hot shower. For somebody else, it might be taking a walk, checking the tomato plants growing in pots on the patio, or dancing when nobody is watching.

Finally, Cobham has given herself permission to not do things perfectly and extend the same grace to others.

“You can say ‘I’m going to get this project done’ and someone is coming in sideways and saying ‘I want some cereal,’” she said.

**B. Planning for the long-term**

Flexibility is key, but so is recognising that these are truly trying times.

Journalists have always risen to the occasion in times of great tragedy and stress. Newsrooms often are at the top of their game in the face of a dramatic news event, such as 9/11 or the devastation of a natural disaster. But those events, no matter how intense, have an end date. Even with hurricane coverage, it may stretch on for months or years, but there is a point of relief. There is also a model for coverage.

That is not the case with COVID-19.

It is also different because of how quickly it changed how work is done. We all suddenly found ourselves typing from a makeshift office in the den while
apologising for the noise from a “hangry” child or a yappy dog or a cat demanding your personal face time during a Zoom conference. Plus, at first most of us thought it would be temporary.

Dr. James Rodriguez is a senior research scientist and director of trauma-informed services at the New York-based McSilver Institute. He was also a panelist at the ONA seminar featuring Cobham. There must be some recognition that we are living through traumatic times, he said. News companies immersed first in the COVID news, then the civil unrest, experienced that trauma in a more immediate way because many are literally in the streets. That sense of chaos is compounded by the fact that there is no end in sight.

At first, most people thought quarantine might last a few weeks, maybe a month. Few could envision that working from home would be permanent.

In the beginning, some were content to work in pajamas on the couch and treated the new remote office as an extended (if not great fun) vacation, Rodriguez said. But now that remote work looks to last in some growing number of newsrooms until the end of 2020 and maybe beyond, there is another layer of stress.

Initial laidback attitudes about remote work need to change for long-term success, he said. That means establishing a pattern and a process for the day. People often under-estimate how routine relates to productivity.

“It’s that walk to the office, it’s that coffee that you get everyday,” Rodriguez said. These are the actions that mentally signify where you are in your day — and when your work day ends.

New routines can be established, but that doesn’t just happen. It takes work, mindfulness, and intention. When done best, this offers unique time for family, work, and for the individual.

It’s safe to say that journalists pride themselves for thinking on their feet and adapting to situations as needed, often without complaint. Covering trauma can cause trauma, and how media companies deal with that may have a big impact on the future of those organisations.
Positive stress helps people focus and meet deadlines Rodriguez said. Negative stress, especially ongoing negative stress like protesters in the street or a surging number of COVID-19 cases, can become toxic and decrease productivity, even causing or worsening chronic health problems. That, in turn, could lower productivity and challenge the financial gains media companies hope to make as they abandon expensive office space.

C. WFH training

The issue of training is critical. If an employee has worked within the company’s unique publishing system, they have some technical expertise. But if they have not used Google Docs, Slack, or Zoom, frequently it’s a good idea to offer training or designated technical support. Most programmes, like Zoom, offer training videos.

But that may not match the learning styles of more experienced people on your team. Offer one-on-one tutoring from IT or access to an outside service such as GeekSquad or even pair a tech Slack-savvy employee with someone who needs a boost.

In the long run, a little training will avoid a lot of lost productivity and frustration on everyone trying to meet in a digital space, and employees will feel empowered.

The Society for Human Resource Management noted the importance of training in a report published in May 2019. The report looked at companies like IBM, Yahoo, Aetna, and Best Buy that tried remote work — only to end the programme.

“Often, working at home is [allowed] because workers are demanding it, but with no training for managers or employees, companies discontinue it and say it’s not working for them.”

— Jeanne Meister, Founding Partner, Future Workplace
There are a few theories for this change of heart about remote work, mostly negative lessons:

- Employers allow people to work remotely without giving them the proper training or resources to do so productively.
- Supervisors, untrained on how to properly manage and monitor remote workers, find it easier to manage someone face-to-face.
- Some supervisors, perhaps because they feel they must be in control or don’t trust employers, find that remote workers and their teams aren’t as productive as when they are onsite.

Jeanne Meister, founding partner of Future Workplace, a New York-based HR executive network and research firm, subscribes largely to the first and second theories.

For instance, remote workers often aren’t taught how to set up a teleconference or video call. Or a remote worker may not know the best way to alert colleagues that he or she is in a meeting and can’t be disturbed.

“Often, working at home is [allowed] because workers are demanding it, but with no training for managers or employees, companies discontinue it and say it’s not working for them,” Meister said.

> When work and home activities take place in the same physical space, physical, temporal, and psychological boundaries between work and home can become blurred.

— “Strategies for Successful Telework: How Effective Employees Manage Work/Home Boundaries.” by Strategic HR Review
D. Possibilities and pitfalls for WFH employees, especially women

Clark Meerefield is author and researcher at the Journalism Resource run by the Shorenstein Center at Harvard University. Meerefield compiled a comprehensive collection of studies pointing to the possibilities and pitfalls of remote work.

For the paper "Strategies for Successful Telework: How Effective Employees Manage Work/Home Boundaries," from June 2016 in Strategic HR Review, Kelly Basile and T. Alexandra Beauregard conducted 40 in-depth interviews with people teleworking full- or part-time at an organisation that did not have a culture of long work hours. Basile is an assistant professor of management at Emmanuel College, and Beauregard is a reader in organisational psychology at Birbeck, University of London.

“When work and home activities take place in the same physical space, physical, temporal, and psychological boundaries between work and home can become blurred,” Basile and Beauregard write.

Meerefield found studies supporting the idea that teleworkers with responsibilities unrelated to work, like walking a dog or caring for children after school, had stronger work-home boundaries than those only accountable to themselves. Certain routine behaviors, like shutting down a computer at the end of the day, or turning off the ringer on a work phone, also helped establish boundaries.

It is also helpful if you can literally shut the door on your office space so you aren’t constantly reminded of what is left undone. It could be worth investing in a

*Separating your work area from your living space reinforces the separation between work and home life.*
decorative screen if there is no designated room for work. The kitchen table is not ideal.

Those with children or spouses at home during telework time were most successful when they communicated clearly and consistently that they needed their workday to be free of household noise and interruptions.

“In organisations where after-hours communications, early meetings, and weekend working are the norm, employees preferring segmentation will have difficulty establishing and maintaining boundaries between work and personal time,” Basile and Beauregard write. Meerefield said it is a theme throughout the research literature: Whether telework works for individual employees depends on company culture.

Another study Merrefield reviewed was “Toward Understanding Remote Workers’ Management of Work-Family Boundaries: The Complexity of Workplace Embeddedness,” from December 2015 in Group and Organization Management. Kimberly Eddleston and Jay Mulki conducted 52 interviews with sales and service employees from across the United States who worked from home full-time. Eddleston is a professor of entrepreneurship and innovation at Northeastern University, and Mulki is an associate professor of marketing there.

Many of the interviewees worked at organisations where it was common to work more than 40 hours a week, sometimes outside of regular hours. Even though interviews were in-depth, the authors caution that because their sample is small, their findings cannot be generalised to the broader population.

Still, the findings indicate a telework divide between men and women. About 62% of the interviewees were women. Some women experienced benefits — spending time with their families while also being able to step away for urgent deadlines. But more than half of women working remotely, compared with just one-tenth of men, reported their spouse didn’t respect boundaries between work and family. “You know, I get distracted by my private life,” one woman told the researchers. “It kind of interferes with my professional life.”

With an acuity applicable to today’s era of widespread coronavirus telework, Eddleston and Mulki write that “organisations should educate remote workers on the need to establish boundaries between work and family, and train these workers to resist temptations to perform work activities during family time.”

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INMA | THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF WORK-FROM-HOME ON NEWSROOMS
The tech gap is real

Technology has made the remote workforce possible, but the need for technology has made it clear that some areas are sorely lacking in tech abilities. Managing this lack now becomes a priority for news media companies striving to remain competitive in a changing environment.

A. Wi-Fi access

Research by the Pew Charitable Trust estimates:

- 75% of American adults now have high-speed broadband Internet service at home, up dramatically from just 1% in 2000.
- Many rural areas have been left out of the broadband revolution.
- About 14% of households in urban areas are still digitally disconnected.

If there is one piece of critical infrastructure that will provide jobs to those in left-behind places, it is high-speed broadband.

As is true for the United States as a whole, mobile technology use among rural adults has also risen rapidly, with the share of those owning smartphones and tablets increasing sharply since 2011. Ownership of desktop or laptop computers, by contrast, has only slightly risen since 2008.

These comparably low levels of adoption among rural residents may be due to a unique feature of rural life. Even though rural areas are more wired today than in the past, other research shows that substantial segments of rural America still lack the infrastructure needed for high-speed Internet, and what access these areas do have
tends to be slower than that of non-rural areas. The U.S. Federal Communications Commission is on Phase II of its Connect America Fund, a plan to expand broadband access and mobile coverage for rural communities in the United States.

But another Pew study also shows the importance of Internet access in the time of COVID. About 53% of Americans polled in April 2020 said the Internet was essential during the coronavirus outbreak. That study also shows increased concern by some policymakers about how less digitally connected students will fare in this new learning environment — a disconnect that could be reflected in news companies with a diverse or far-flung staff.

Even in places where the need is high and expansion efforts are well-funded, problems have emerged.

**B. Equipment equity**

Let’s assume everyone has broadband and consistent access to the Internet — or at least has discovered the dead spot in the corner of the living room where there is no reception and knows not to work there.
There are still some unknowns and some changes that may become critical. All you have to do is watch an hour of live streaming cable TV news to know not all Zoom or Skype images are created equal.

There is buffering as the image stalls and stutters.

There is the loss of audio/video synchronisation, when the visual lip movements of a speaker don’t match the sound of the spoken words. (That is referred to as “skew.”)

Sound quality is also an issue. For that Italian journalist whose interview was interrupted by a half-naked woman, that was only one of his problems; he also sounded like he was talking from within a barrel, probably because he was too far away from his laptop.

There are also a number of smart people who don’t seem to understand how backlighting can leave your face in the shadows and that trying to listen to a silhouette for 30 minutes can be quite challenging.

The quality of video images is also starkly different. Some images are crisp and clean, others look like you are peering through a pair of glasses that haven’t been cleaned since the pandemic began.
Pick three or four journalism Webinars from organisations with impeccable credentials and see how quickly the best information, when presented poorly, becomes tiresome and ineffective.

To have a truly equitable remote workspace, does everyone need a top-end camera? Does everybody need a USB microphone for the best audio quality? Will individual employees need to learn the intricacies of lighting?

How much direction or restriction can be given to backgrounds? Especially if interviewing becomes a Zoom- or Skype-based exercise, are approved and branded backgrounds — like those used by televised news shows — needed?

What are the limitations for people with a disability? What accommodations must be standard? What are the implications for more veteran journalists who may not adapt as quickly?

Individually, any one of these issues seems small, especially if you are meeting in a digital space occasionally. If such conferencing is every day, all day, it is no longer inconsequential.

**C. WFH tech questions**

Finally, what long-term technological changes need to be explored? Broadcast journalists are trained to look at the camera. The rest of us naturally look at the faces of the people we are talking to, which means you are rarely looking at the person while you are talking to them.

Does the traditional placement of the cameras on laptops and other devices need to evolve for a more natural, human-like interaction?
The takeaway for most companies is that remote working works. But in order for it to be effective, there need to be new sets of rules established and management must provide a clear outline of their expectations.

A. Blurred boundaries between work and home

“The research has generally shown that for most outcomes, remote work leads to small but tangible benefits,” says I/O psychologist Bradford Bell, Ph.D., professor and director of the Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies (CAHRS) at Cornell University. “Employees who telecommute tend to be slightly more satisfied, and their performance tends to be the same or a little higher.”

But researchers also caution that teleworking is rarely an all-or-nothing arrangement. Some employees work from home a few days a month, some a few days a week and some full-time — and the extent of a worker’s telecommuting can dictate his or her experience. For instance, a meta-analysis by Ravi S. Gajendran of Pennsylvania State University and a co-author of an article in the Journal of Applied Psychology, found that telecommuters’ relationships with colleagues generally only suffered if they worked remotely three or more days each week.

In addition to social isolation, remote workers often find it challenging to define boundaries between their work and family life. Since they don’t have the physical or psychological separation between the two, it’s easy for the lines to blur, said Timothy Golden, PhD, an industrial/organisational psychologist and professor and coordinator of enterprise management and organisation at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York.
That can sometimes mean that family and social obligations, such as a child that needs cared for, can bleed over into work hours, but it’s more likely that work will consume their personal life. Teleworkers tend to have longer-than-average workdays and have more difficulty disconnecting completely from work.

That, in turn, can cause remote workers to associate their homes with work, according to a study appearing in the 2017 journal *Group & Organization Management*. Additionally, a 2013 *Gallup poll* found that teleworkers log an extra four hours per week on average compared with their counterparts in the office.

While employers may see these outcomes as positive, translating into higher productivity and better workplace citizenship, it can be problematic in the long run. Gajendran and his colleagues found that teleworkers often go above and beyond — for instance, by responding to e-mails outside of work hours — to demonstrate their organisational commitment. But experts say that without firmer boundaries, employees can experience exhaustion and burnout and that such overwork should be discouraged by managers and organisations.

**B. Managers and employees in WFH**

Susan Davidson Talmadge, president and owner of HR Catalyst Consulting LLC, recently presented some best practices for managers and employees in a Webinar sponsored by *America’s Newspapers*.

**Managers:**

- Be a leader. Don’t just say things like, “Be safe.” Empathise and realise your workers have their own challenges.

- Set out the tasks with deadlines, but be flexible, especially on working schedules. But be clear about how to communicate with the employee.

- Good employees are good employees anywhere. You weren’t standing over their shoulder at work, so assume you don’t need to be virtually standing over their shoulder while they are working at home.

- Ask them what their challenges are, what help they need, what complications they are having. Listen to their response and help when possible.
Workers:

- Set a schedule. Don’t spend all day at the desk. Go outside, take breaks, be intentional about breaks. Set a timer if needed.

- Set a defined workspace. Be alert to ergonomic issues. Communicate with family members when you need to not be interrupted.

- Set defined work times and ask family and friends to recognise those boundaries.

Here are some additional resources that may be helpful:

- Sample Policy for Telecommuting

- OSHA’s COVID-19 Web page

- Interim Guidance from the CDC for businesses and employers to plan and respond to coronavirus disease 2019

C. Remote people are still people

Some media companies have been pioneering in the work. Here are some key takeaways from a 2016 panel by the Online News featuring Association Mandy Jenkins of Storyful, Rebecca Eisenberg of Upworthy, Nasr ul Hadi of ICFJ-Knight, and moderator Anika Ananad. Their insights are still valuable, especially today:

- Don’t have difficult conversations in text. Call someone on the phone or, even better, meet them on a face-to-face video chat for serious conversations.

- Do escalate the medium, not the tone. If a conversation over e-mail gets tense or difficult, instead of continuing over e-mail, get on a video or phone call. Talking it out is better than going back and forth in text.

- Do make time for the team to talk together regularly, be it a daily stand-up or weekly staff meetings. Structured, planned times together are important. Also: Have an agenda!
• Do set expectations for how to communicate. “Feel free to ping, feel free to ignore.” E-mail subject line headers [RRR] = Rapid Response Required, etc. set company-wide standards for how to communicate when something is urgent vs. when it’s needed by end of day (EOD) or end of week (EOW).

• Do have a way to make sure people get to speak up in meetings, especially when everyone is on mute, or some people are in the same room and some are calling in. At Upworthy, when you want to speak on a call you write “stack” in the chat. Someone keeps track of the stack list, and everyone who stacks gets to speak.

• Do have visual representations of organisational structure, process flows, even roles where possible. This helps establish a common frame of reference. (See example here.)

• Do have space for people to connect and communicate in a non-transactional way — basically make sure people have opportunities and spaces to have casual conversations that aren’t work related.

• Do have an internal wiki or resource that is regularly updated with processes, standards, and frequently asked questions (FAQ).}
Useful communication tools

Slack is a great, if not the best, collaborative tool for Storyful newsroom. We use it for large-scale comm and private messaging. Being able to add alerts and integrations with other newsroom tools is critical.

At Storyful, the newsroom is on a rolling, 24-7 Google Hangout for employees in all locations to work together and talk in real-time. Video is optional (especially during meal breaks!). Storyful does most meetings in Hangouts, but uses Zoom for the bigger team (15+), and Appear.in for quick 1-on-1.

Zoom is a superior video conferencing tool in terms of the call quality and user interface. It can handle calls with up to 50 individual participants. Zoom also allows for screen sharing and call recording. As Zoom has surged in popularity, though, there have been concerns about privacy. The company has earned praise for a 90-day improvement plan initiated April 1.

Storyful uses WhatsApp both as a social channel for chatter across all offices as well as an alert system when we need staff assistance on big stories. The best part is it works everywhere and on every mobile device.

‘If This, Then That’ creates recipes that trigger between different programmes and apps. You can set up Slack alerts every time an astronaut goes into space or every time the president signs a bill into law. You can set up alerts that let your team know when you’re at your desk or send you the top trending stories on reddit each morning. Infinitely customisable and super helpful, as it connects to most apps/programs.

LastPass generates secure passwords and stores them for accounts that multiple people log into like Getty.
CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

It is certainly possible for many news companies to shift to a remote workforce. The model being explored by McClatchy is worth watching: seven newsrooms will go completely remote in August and remain so until at least the end of the year. The plan is to eventually return to smaller office space that would be shared. Not all staffers would report to the office every day, but teams would rotate using the space. Studies have shown remote working can lead to better morale, but it is not without challenges. Businesses that have tried remote work and returned to the office learned that succeeding involves more than just changing where a desk is located. Employees need to set a schedule and keep a routine. There needs to be dedicated office space.

Employers need to set out clear expectations, anticipate new human resource challenges, and offer adequate IT support and training.

Ideally, companies will invest in technology, so all employees operate on equal footing. But the issue of access to quality, dependable Internet service will create a challenge of inclusion and diversity as urban and rural areas are often under-served.

Most importantly, the culture of the traditional newsroom will need to change. Emotional support and empathy will be needed in ways not typically part of the hard-charging media environment. Especially as the coronavirus continues to ravage the world, there must be intentional recognition that the members of the media, as all people, are enduring unprecedented trauma and stress.

In the long run, a move to a remote workforce could significantly reshape the media, perhaps for the better. Most news companies are based in a few urban
centers. If people can work from anywhere, some may opt to move away from the most expensive housing markets. That expansion into different communities would deepen and expand coverage that is often seen through a lens that differs from the world’s non-urban population.