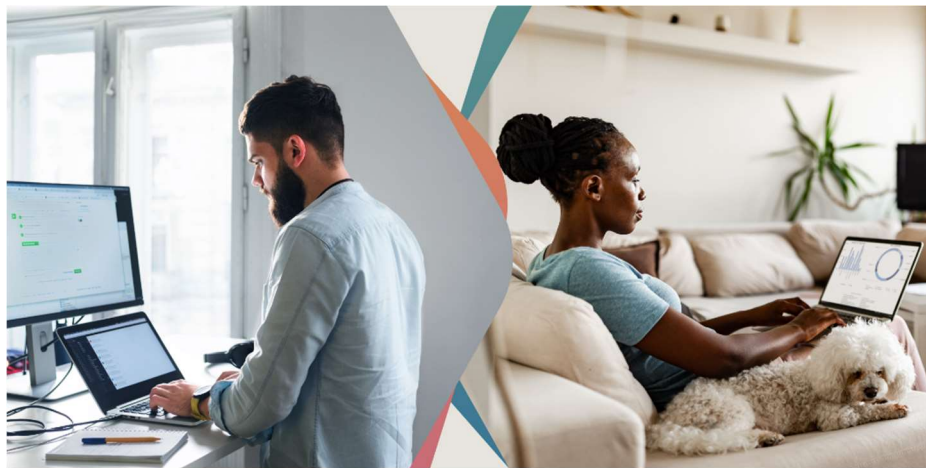# DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

## *COVID-19, DIGITIZATION & HYBRID WORKSPACES:*

### *Implications and Opportunities for Public Sector Organizations*

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{Image source: Bogdan Udrea, www.1e.com)

## *OVERVIEW*

The purpose of this report is to examine the emerging contours and prospects for hybrid workforce and workspace strategies within the Canadian public sector. If 2022 brings about even the beginnings of an evolution of Covid-19 from pandemic to endemic, governments will face a critical choice: to facilitate a safe revival of physical office settings as the nucleus of government operations and public servant interactions, or to embrace hybrid strategies as the centrepiece of innovative workspace redesign.

The essence of hybrid goes beyond a binary choice between working in a physical office or working from home. An ideal hybrid model enables the seamless alignment of both in-person and virtual processes across innovative and flexible workspaces designed to strengthen individual and collective performance capacities. Even with the optimistic presumption of Covid-19 gradually subsiding, and even with appropriate safety measures and layers of protection in place (i.e. vaccines, masking, distancing etc.), there is a growing view, explored in this report that a full-scale return to physical office settings would be less than optimal. Yet in line with the choice presented above, it remains to be seen whether hybrid work arrangements will be mainly tolerated as transitional phases for some workers - or more fully embraced as a strategic opportunity. This report delves into the tensions and reasons behind this uncertainty and how they reflect wider evolutionary trends in public sector reform and recent and ongoing digital government efforts especially.

To pursue a hybrid path as a strategic opportunity, this report presents three key design principles to guide such efforts: *differentiation, engagement, and inclusion*. In addition, six broad research directions are offered as some of the most likely themes and determinants that will shape hybrid's acceptance and evolution going forward. As such, they merit further investigation by scholars and governments alike.

With respect to inclusion specifically, the potential exists for hybrid workspaces to both widen diversity and deepen inclusion through more varied career progressions. In place of the traditional 'corporate ladder' with locational and scheduling work patterns that have reinforced historical biases and systemic barriers, hybrid models can democratize participation and professional advancement. Nevertheless, any potential is just that. To be realized, governments must first recognize hybrid's promise and the unique occasion at hand for human ingenuity, digital innovation, and leadership and governance renewal.

Insights from this report were gathered from both direct and indirect sourcing: published surveys, studies, commentaries, and media stories; interviews with senior public servants; virtual classroom interactions with mid-career government managers and next generation, aspiring managers; as well as several professional development and conference forums over the past two years. I am grateful to all participants for the stimulation, feedback, and learning. My hope is that this report can help to spark and sustain the crucial conversations needed within governments to meaningfully appreciate and exploit the hybrid opportunity as the basis for a brighter future.

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[1] *This pre-publication report has been freely shared without professional editing. Any typos or other errors are the sole responsibility of the author. Feedback on the report is always welcomed and appreciated.*

*MAIN FINDINGS*

- The notion of a hybrid workspace is more than a binary choice between working in an office or remote working from home. Instead, it's about the seamless alignment of both in-person and virtual settings in innovative ways designed to strengthen both individual and collective performance capacities.

- Covid-19 has significantly accelerated digital transformation across all sectors. Significant portions of Canada's workforce have shifted to work from home on a part-time or full-time basis during the pandemic. Many workers remain cautious about a return to the office for a myriad of reasons tied to safety, performance, work-life balance, mental health, and other considerations.

    o Surveys undertaken during the pandemic (several cited in this report) suggest that for most office-based professional workers, locational and scheduling flexibility is viewed as both desirable and beneficial, even as many are keen to return to the office for at least part of their work week.

    o *These sorts of varied preferences and the reasoning behind them underpin the utility and necessity of devising hybrid solutions.*

- As private sector companies (particularly those in digital technologies and financial services) are more aggressively embracing permanent hybrid arrangements, governments face heightened pressures for recruiting and retaining talent in an increasingly competitive labour market.

    o As just two examples, Shopify and the Royal Bank of Canada have announced plans to permanently deploy hybrid arrangements, while the Canadian financial sector has conveyed broad for support workspace flexibility and hybrid innovation (albeit with caveats and concerns discussed within this report below).

- *Differentiation, engagement, and inclusion are three key design principles for framing and designing hybrid workspace and workforce development strategies.*

  o Deploying these principles creatively and fairly will require a strategic balancing of government-wide policy and infrastructure – along with flexibility, agility, and experimentation across a diverse set of public sector organizations.

  o The underlying traditionalism of public sector governance (i.e. hierarchical structures and standardized work models) may impede hybrid innovation – favouring instead, where and when feasible, a return to in-person settings, particularly at senior managerial and political echelons.

  o Many public servants, particularly mid-level managers, are concerned about a lack of employee engagement and having limited input into decision-making processes for future workspace planning.

  o A limited and partial acceptance of hybrid arrangements by governments threatens to deepen existing workforce divides stemming from professional and demographic cleavages including education and skills, age, gender, and ethnicity (among others).

  o Inclusion arguably represents the most important set of opportunities tied to hybrid workforce capacities, while also presenting the most significant set of risks and uncertainties. This theme merits significant attention and resources as hybrid strategies are developed.

  o In crafting hybrid strategies, inter-disciplinary and integrative frameworks for formulating, implementing, assessing, and adapting plans and models are essential. Traditional silos between 'digital' functions and 'people' functions must be overcome.

- The evolution of democratic institutions and political leadership will play an important role in shaping the acceptance and expansion of hybrid workspaces within the public service. A legislative body embracing hybrid principles and practices is more likely to be supportive of likeminded reforms and innovations within the public service (with the opposite also being true).

- Climate change efforts and the pursuit of hybrid workspace strategies are closely inter-related given the implications for commuting patterns as well as wider urban planning and architectural design factors that shape the carbon footprint of public sector organizations (and the ability of governments to serve as model employers for other sectors).

    o Although beyond the scope of this report, the inter-relationships between hybrid workspaces and smart growth planning will become more important in an evermore digitally connected world. This theme is identified as an area for future research.

- The adoption of hybrid workspaces across private industry and the non-profit sector will create new challenges for public sector authorities in terms of employee safety, health, and wellness regulation. The gradual emergence of 'right to unplug' legislation in various jurisdictions is indicative.

    o Hybrid models within governments will better enable them to provide guidance and oversight of other sectors. Although the provision of hybrid regulatory oversight is beyond the scope of this report, it is identified as an area for future research and public sector capacity building.

- Hybrid solutions create specific opportunities and risks for local governments and renewed pressures for strengthened collaborative governance across jurisdictions.

    o *These specific themes of Municipalities and federalist governance are the focus of a separate appendix to this report.*

*Hybrid arrangements should never replicate existing bad practices—as when firms began automating work processes, decades ago.*

o   Linda Gratton, London Business School.

*If you are not willing to risk the usual, you will have to settle for the ordinary.*

o   Jim Rohn, Motivational Speaker.

## 1)  INTRODUCTION & OBJECTIVES

With the steady expansion of the Internet and digital life, even prior to Covid-19 (Covid) there had been growing interest in the viability and effectiveness of more geographically distributed and flexible work models, typically described as 'tele-working'. As an advocate of digital innovation, for example, President Obama championed himself as 'tele-worker in chief'. In a related manner, a 2012 survey of public servants working for the Canadian Province of British Columbia reported that less than one half of respondents viewed the office or cubicle as their most productive work setting (Province of BC 2012; Roy 2013).

This latter finding is particularly striking given that smart devices (i.e. phones and tablets) were just beginning their mainstream ascent. Since that time, the feasibly of remote work and virtual collaboration has augmented significantly and steadily. Yet despite this heightened feasibility, the physical office space has endured as the main focal point for government operations and decision-making, especially at the core of the largest public sector entities.

As we know, Covid starkly disrupted this enduring reality. Statistics Canada reports that from 'April 2020 to June 2021, at least 30% of employees aged 15 to 64 had performed most of their weekly work hours from home (versus just 4% in 2016). Roughly 80% of those working from home during the pandemic would prefer to continuing doing so even as the pandemic eases (Statistics Canada 2021a). A December 2021 article by CBC News underlined locational flexibility as the top demand of private sector professionals heading into 2022 (Nixon 2021). A separate online survey of 500 Canadian office worker by Citrix found that 63% of respondents would only change jobs if offered hybrid flexibility, while 59% would be likely or very likely to move to a new city for a new job without a regular commuting requirement (Wilson 2021). In line with these findings, a Canadian workforce survey undertaken by KPMG in 2021 found that 71% of all workers expect hybrid to become a permanent fixture of their organization (KPMG 2021).

With respect to Statistics Canada findings, however, while one third of the entire labour force working from home is unprecedented (a figure undoubtedly much higher for core public sector operational departments during Covid peaks), it still leaves two-thirds of workers either in offices or on worksites of one sort or another. In terms of KPMG's findings, nearly one third of workers seemingly do not expect hybrid arrangements, either because they do not want them, or they have doubts about their employer's capacities or willingness to provide them.

The implication for governments is a varied set of public servant experiences and expectations pertaining to feasibility, preferences, and optimization across on-site, remote work, and hybrid arrangements.

The essence of hybrid goes beyond binary choices between working in a physical office or working from home. Ideally, a hybrid model enables the seamless alignment of both in-person and virtual settings within innovative and flexible workspaces designed to strengthen both individual and collective performance capacities.

This report seeks to shed new light and better understand the potential for hybrid workspaces within the Canadian public sector and their implications for public sector governance. Although it is not presumed that hybrid workspaces will become a permanent feature of government, the case is made that they must become so to effectively recruit and retain skilled workers while meeting the policy and service challenges of an evermore digitized society – one also likely to face endemic Covid challenges and impacts for some time to come.

As George Penn of Gartner Consulting observes: 'Success in a hybrid environment requires employers to move beyond viewing remote or hybrid environments as temporary or short -term strategy and to treat it as an opportunity' (Penn 2021). Yet as with every form of disruptive innovation, there will be varying degrees of dissent, skepticism, and the underlying inertia of familiarity. Tensions are normal, and can even be beneficial, provided that past models inform rather than constrain future ones.

*A better understanding of these tensions and how they can shape and/or stymie hybrid's scope and potential is a key objective of this report. From this understanding, how governments should proceed in leveraging hybrid as an opportunity is the second important objective.*

## 2) CONTEXT & METHODOLOGY

The traditional office setting has been the bedrock of bureaucratic organizational governance and the conduct of the public service. Nevertheless, even prior to Covid's arrival, governments were seeking to reframe how offices are structured and how people interact within them. For some illumination, it may be useful to consider the evolution of public sector workplaces in recent years with two specific examples.

In the early years of my academic career, there would be occasional visit the offices of a central agency of the Government of Canada which housed many officials responsible for early e-government efforts. The bland, aging office building centrally located in the heart of Ottawa, a short walk from other agencies as well as Parliament, featured a classic set of standardized offices along with partitioned cubicles. Typically windowless meeting rooms facilitated group interactions when deemed necessary. Despite the intelligence and commitment of individuals working there, the limited physical openness and lack of spontaneous human contact seemed to stymie collective energy. In other words, it looked and felt bureaucratic.

More recently, albeit still prior to Covid's arrival, my own visits to the same central agency brought about a stark contrast with various teams responsible for digital government (primarily the Chief Information Officer's (CIO) Branch, Canadian Digital Service, and the Open Government unit) located in a refurbished building not far from the previous one but a world apart in terms of layout. Complementing traditional offices were open innovation labs, collaborative workstations, and a building foyer that buzzed with mobile devices and both planned and spontaneous human interactions.

As these digitally minded units were striving to attract a younger and more diverse demographic (also seeking to import a more creative and digitally savvy ethos into government), many design aspects of this newer building seemingly resembled gatherings and facilities of a modern university campus more so than a traditional government office building. At the same time, despite the many innovative and enviable aspects of this setting, it remained a shared *workplace* (emphasis on place) with the predominant mode of work being onsite rather than virtual (even as mobile connectivity enabled locational flexibility within the premises as well as offsite).

With respect to these contrasting images, it should be quite apparent that just about everything that is novel and innovative about the more recent workplace setting has become largely incompatible – at least temporarily, with the health and safety requirements of the Covid era. The less constrained and more organic human interactions and spatial flows throughout the modernized building – once viewed as dynamic enablers of innovation and collaboration, are now potential sources of contagion (and a risk to be mitigated by a host of protocol and safeguards).

As Ruth Porat of Google (Alphabet) observed, bringing workers back to the office in such an environment would prove a good deal more complex than sending them home. This caution is reflected in various employee surveys (cited above and below) across both government and industry conveying a diverse set of attitudes and preferences in terms of where, when, and how to undertake professional responsibilities.

*If there is any broad takeaway from the pandemic through 2020 and 2021, it lies in the stark absence of uniformity of what workers desire going forward - due to variances in Covid anxiety levels, physiology, cognitive capacities, work style preferences, the type of work being performed, as well as individual lifestyle and household considerations.*

At the same time, any pursuit of a hybrid workspace strategy is not simply about responding to employee preferences (as important as these may be). Even in addition to the in-person requirements of certain job tasks, physical proximity and in-person interactions have long been central to organizational life. Without question, a hybrid environment is one where they matter less – or rather can be replicated at least partially through virtualization, but they will still matter and surely always will.

The confluence of Covid and digitization is historically unique but the challenges of adapting to changing circumstances are not new. Even prior to Covid, governments have long struggled with digital governance reforms that invariably bring about tensions between tradition and incrementalism on the one hand, and more transformational ambitions on the other hand (Roy 2006/2013; Clarke 2019). Covid has brought about an unprecedented shift to remote work for many public servants, but there is much uncertainty about what lies ahead (Clarke 2020; Lindquist 2020; Roy 2020).

*An exploratory investigation:*

To better understand the present context and more effectively assess and address the opportunities and risks that lie ahead, the methodology for this report is multi-layered and deliberately qualitative. The report seeks to probe the tentative underpinnings of a partially hybrid pandemic experience (i.e. widespread remote work arrangements with limited in-office activities), as well as the prospective opportunities and challenges in extending and expanding hybrid models going forward.

Importantly, the focus of this report is not to determine whether a hybrid future is warranted or not. As noted at the outset, and as further justified throughout this report, there is an underlying assumption that hybrid models will play some role in most all large organizations going forward. What does remain to be determined - and what is the focus here, is the degree to which governments in Canada will embrace hybrid as a strategic opportunity for workforce development and workspace innovation, versus a more temporary and limited transitory phase.

The inputs and insights from this report are based upon several layers of inquiry and review, beginning with a literature review of professional surveys, research studies, and informed media commentaries on the hybrid experience through 2020 and 2021 (as well

as selective pre-Covid themes, notably that of digital governance). In addition, a portion of the learning underpinning this report stems from discussions with approximately seventy-five mid-career public servants, from all government levels in Canada, who have been living the Covid experience professionally. As these interactions were undertaken within the contours of a graduate degree program, they are not presented or analyzed as formal empirical data, but they have provided a tremendous source of illumination and learning.

In addition, a set of ten, non-structured interviews were also undertaken between August and October 2021 with senior public servants in executive level positions (individuals without any academic affiliation with the author) as to their own current experiences and expectations. Interviewees were granted anonymity given the fluidity of Covid conditions and evolving work arrangements at the time of meeting: the purpose of the interviews was also less about testing specific lines of inquiry and more about gathering context and insights generally. Lastly, the author of this report has presented some of the themes and directions discussed in this report to several professional development forums and conferences since the start of the pandemic, an additional and much appreciated source of learning as well.

*Hybrid for now – but not necessarily a hybrid future:*

Throughout 2021, governments in Canada proved quite cautious about conveying intentions to embrace hybrid solutions on a permanent basis, with the focus instead on seeking a return to office settings when and as feasible. At various intervals throughout the year, many federal and provincial government entities attempted to orchestrate a phased and partial return of workers to offices as lessening Covid restrictions allowed.

For instance, at the federal level in November 2021 the President of the Treasury Board for the Government of Canada (Minister Mona Fortier) issued a statement expressing support for the gradual easing of some workplace restrictions, in line with Health Canada guidance. Understandably, by December 2021, in the face of Omicron's rapid acceleration, all governments had formally halted these moves, once again encouraging remote work wherever feasible (extended through the early months of 2022).

Much as it has underpinned remote work during the pandemic, digital government is foundational for any hybrid efforts going forward. Prior to the 2021 federal election, the then-Minister of Digital Government had been overseeing a renewed digital strategy – one partly driven and informed by Covid's acceleration of digitization (a first version of this strategy was released in June 2021). Post election, this Cabinet post ceased to exist. Even as many elements of digital government undoubtedly continue within the Treasury Board portfolio (and elsewhere), the abrupt and unexplained disappearance of a Cabinet voice specific to digital matters within the public service certainly raises questions about digital leadership.

A the very least, however, the prolonging of Covid, the deepening importance of climate change efforts as a Government priority (in 2019, the federal government's 'greening government' strategy' emphasized remote work arrangements as one lever of carbon emissions reduction through lessened commuting), and the acceleration of digitization due to the pandemic itself, all combine to provide a supportive context for at least the consideration of hybrid governance options for the future of the federal public service (with likeminded contexts for all government levels in Canada[2]).

*Recognizing this evolving context, in July 2021 the Government of Canada committed to 'begin to plan for their workplace of the future, especially those contemplating flexible, hybrid workforce models.'[3]*

As the Government itself recognizes, hybrid solutions go far beyond the introduction and expansion of remote work arrangements. Although hybrid strategies can and must be deployed with health and safety top of mind, there are wider strategic considerations at play. A better understanding of these strategic considerations is a central aim of this report, ideally to help ensure that going forward, hybrid is viewed as a means of recasting and strengthening public sector governance even when – and perhaps especially when, Covid's shackles finally begin to ease.

*The remainder of this report is organized as follows:*

The next (third) section probes the pandemic experience in terms of employee and managerial experiences as well as expectations and uncertainties for what lies ahead. The fourth section then presents three key design principles as fundamental enablers of the pursuit of hybrid workspace design and hybrid workforce development strategies. In section five, some of the most important sets of determinants likely to shape hybrid approaches and outcomes are identified as future opportunities for scholarly investigation as well as applied research priorities for governments as next steps are contemplated. The report's conclusion is then followed by two appendices (the first briefly examining hybrid's unique and important implications for local governments and federalist governance; and the second some practical guidance for developing hybrid models from a recent UK multi-stakeholder initiative stemming from a pre-Covid Prime Ministerial directive updated to reflect the urgency of the pandemic). Finally, a listing of all sources cited is provided.

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[2] While this report draws from international surveys and interviews from officials from all government levels, the primary focus of discussions and examples is the Government of Canada. A brief appendix also addresses the shared and somewhat unique implications of hybrid potentials for local governments, as well as for federalist governance across jurisdictions.

[3] From a joint statement issued by the Chief Human Resources Officers of Treasury Board and Public Services and Procurement Canada along with the President of Shared Services Canada. Source: https://www.canada.ca/en/government/publicservice/covid-19/approach-advance-flexible-work.html

### 3) PROBING THE PANDEMIC EXPERIENCE: HYBRID EXPECTATIONS & UNCERTAINTIES

The Obama Presidency was an important inflection point with respect to remote work in the public sector. In its 2012 report to Congress, the US Office of Personnel Management sought to summarize early progress and challenges with tele-working strategies and articulate a strategic basis for not only individual flexibility and benefits, but also as source of public and societal value through improved governmental performance and deepened ecological sensitivity (Roy 2013).

More recently, the Government of Canada emphasizes the importance of a 'digital first and digitally enabled' public service in its Digital Operations Strategic Plan of 2018-22. This plan also invokes both worksite technologies and mobile devices as a basis of an 'open and collaborative work environment…mobile devices can also enable public servants to tele-commute and work while on official travel' (Government of Canada 2018). The creation of Canadian Digital Service (a specialized unit of Treasury Board devoted to digital service innovation) and the Digital Academy (a branch within the Canada School of Public Service) widens this digital ethos and recognition of the importance of workplace innovation through digital platforms and tools.

Despite these initiatives, flexible work arrangements have remained more limited than mainstream, at least prior to Covid, often a way of responding to specific and unique circumstances. For most, the underlying bureaucratic foundations of government create are closely intertwined with traditional office structures – and a culture of presenteeism. More provocatively, one prominent former public servant – turned prominent technology executive, fashioned these pressures and expectations as a basis for the 'busy bastards' culture of large organizations (not solely in the public sector but perhaps especially so) where one needs to be seen to be working in the office to be credited and valued as such (Sandberg with Scovell 2013).

*Covid-19: Traditionalism Upended or Reinforced?*

The pandemic induced shift to remote work for large swaths of the public service has created a unique set of conditions for not only temporary transitions but also more fundamental renewal. Writing in IRPP's Policy Options in the early stage of Covid, one long-time and astute observer of the federal government, Kathryn May, frames this potential as unique and unprecedented:

> *The COVID-19 pandemic has handed the public service a grand-scale opportunity to experiment with new ways of operating, including rethinking the need for massive office buildings in Ottawa-Gatineau and embracing digital government more fully. What public servants learn in the next few months by working remotely and in crisis could jolt the bureaucracy into a re-ordering of practices and culture that reformers haven't been able to do in 25 years (May 2020).*

An important aspect of May's commentary is the enhanced ability for the federal government to recruit skilled workers from anywhere in the country, rather than the largest cities (particularly the National Capital Region). Indeed, as the pandemic has unfolded, many private sector entities would seek to endorse hybrid flexibility on a permanent basis precisely for this reason (Meta Founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg as one prominent example).

May nonetheless cautions that significant structural and cultural reforms would be required for more innovative and flexible governance models to take hold. She also warns that in the absence of systemic change, existing cleavage within government could well be widened through piecemeal deployments of remote work, leading to the emergence of two classes of workers: those on site, and those elsewhere (the basis for this concern is further examined below).

Other observers worry that many of the underlying barriers to longstanding attempts at digital innovation prior to Covid-19 have arguably been reinforced during the pandemic, despite the temporary shift to remote work for many public servants. Carleton University's Amanda Clarke describes this underlying inertia apparent during year one of the pandemic:

> *…those I spoke with underscored that the structures, culture and governance of the federal government largely rolled on as usual over the past year. For example, while public servants now work remotely, there's no evidence to suggest that the federal workforce is re-evaluating how they should use digital tools and approaches to better collaborate across the organization, to streamline approval processes, or to manage teams more effectively. The red tape hierarchical approvals, reporting burden and meeting overload that have long been criticized as barriers to innovation in the federal government remain intact, only now they take place online (Clarke 2021).*

Others may well legitimately retort that in confronting and responding to Covid, much of the initial focus reflected a crisis mentality, often centralized and not out of step with many aspects of traditional Westminster governance (Brock and Turnbull 2020). Given how the crisis arrived with little notice, this predominant replication of existing processes into the virtual sphere is not entirely unexpected – and not entirely without value as governments sought stability in rapidly devising and delivering support measures (ibid.).

Looking ahead, as governments have now shifted from immediate response to ongoing mitigation and recovery, and as digitization across society has deepened considerably, an inflection point presents itself in the form of two questions:

- Will May's opportunity (i.e. the passage above) be seized upon as a basis for hybrid workspace innovation, or will a mixture of traditionalism and incrementalism favour a reversion to in-person office workplaces as the primary setting for workflows and decision-making?

- From their experiences during the pandemic, what sort of expectations, preferences and concerns do public servants have in terms of the choices and potential paths ahead?

The report's entirety is meant to respond to the first question, whereas the rest of this section seeks to address the latter question.

*Most mid-level mangers want hybrid to stay (along with uncertainty at the top):*

Various of surveys from within Canada and internationally have emerged over the past two years that shed some light on remote work and in some instances partially hybrid experiences to date. As observed in the Introduction, a consistent theme from surveys is strong support for the notion of hybrid. One Accenture survey of Canadian workers found that 'Sixty-one per cent of Canadians prefer a hybrid or remote work model and do not want to go back to working full-time from their workplace, as most say they feel they can be productive while primarily working remotely' (Smith and Silverstone 2021). A similar survey by KPMG Canada published in late 2021 (prior to Omicron) found that 43% of Canadian CEO's intended to have most employees working from home at least two days a week going forward (KPMG 2021).

In an unscientific but nonetheless revealing poll of mid career public servants enrolled in graduate level public administration courses since the start of the pandemic (a sample of approximately 75), results were strongly in favour of some mixture of home and office as the preferred arrangement. Only a very small minority would prefer to work solely from home or fully in the office. Exceptions are those in frontline positions such as hospitals or other client care and service providers that have continued to work primarily onsite and thus cannot envision an alternative arrangement at least within their present position. Given that these individuals were undertaking a hybrid form of post-secondary education (online classes with in-person intensives), it is perhaps not surprising to find strong support for hybrid job arrangements as well.

With respect to the separate sample of senior public servants interviewed for this report, there were generally high approval levels for effectiveness of remote and hybrid arrangements through the pandemic, but also widespread apprehension about the way forward. Finding an optimal balance between a safe return to the office and appropriate degrees of flexibility for workers was widely viewed as an unmet challenge.

While all those interviewed had been granted significant degree of flexibility themselves since Covid's arrival, nearly all had returned to the office regularly for a portion of their work week, most sensing at least an informal expectation amongst superiors to do so. Most also anticipated that an eventual lessening of Covid would mean heightened pressure to return to the office more regularly and possibly even for most of the week.

*Anxiety about health and safety:*

While support for hybrid models can and often does reflect a shared desire of many to return to the office, there is also trepidation for some in terms of being able to do so safely. Although it is possible to optimistically anticipate that many of these concerns will gradually dissipate over time, *what will surely be more lasting and pervasive are the impacts on individual behaviour.* Most public servants interviewed for this study anticipate permanent changes to in-person workplace routines and patterns of conduct, while many feel a degree of trepidation in terms of their own anticipated office return.

These sentiments are not unique to the public sector. A November 2021 report by CBC News profiled one company (Klick, a health marketing company with more than one thousand employees in Canada and the US) where 35 percent of workers were not 'quite ready' to return to in-person settings (even prior to reports of Omicron it bears noting), even as many expressed hope and optimism about eventually doing so for at least part of their work week (Nixon 2021). Varying levels of apprehension are therefore to be expected and should be viewed as a key consideration for hybrid models.

*Questions about readiness and support:*

A broadly emerging theme from many pandemic surveys is uncertainty and anxiety about the willingness and ability of employers to commit to hybrid arrangements beyond the pandemic – as well as the readiness and capacities of organizations to provide them on an ongoing basis. A KPMG Canada survey, for instance, found four in five respondents expressed concern about their manager's level of readiness for hybrid arrangements, with nearly one half believing that their organization 'does not understand the implications of a hybrid model' (KPMG 2021).

Reflecting a sentiment from May's commentary cited above, many expressed concerns about 'in groups' versus 'out groups' – with nearly one half of participants feeling as though being overlooked for promotions or facing other types of discrimination were more likely if they continued to work from home (ibid.). These legitimate concerns underscore the overarching importance of inclusion (one of three key design principles addressed further below).

In a similar vein, research by Choudhury on remote work arrangements (our 'work from anywhere future') during Covid found that middle managers from all sectors are those most stressed by the hybrid and remote experiences during Covid (Choudhury 2020). They tend to face a myriad of challenges and pressures in terms of responding to senior leadership, while seeking to effectively support and manage teams of subordinates. Related research from the UK found that line manager support for remote working arrangements being the most critical determinant of employee comfort with flexibility. As well, the absence of this support and the absence of hybrid role models amongst senior level managers were identified as the most significant factors inhibiting comfort with flexible arrangements (Taylor and al. 2021).

These sentiments seem widely shared. For instance, one senior manager interviewed for this report felt that while they were generally quite impressed and satisfied with the ability of individuals to complete their specified tasks while working from home, there was concern about the loss of informal interactions and more serendipitous forms of collaboration that can happen within the office or via social interactions stemming from a common locational starting point. Yet this same person also acknowledged that while the potential erosion of creativity and innovation is often cited as a key concern about remote work – and by extension hybrid arrangements, and not to dimmish the risks here, it also bears noting that these sorts of sentiments stem from mainly office environments with limited knowledge and experience in alternative settings.

By contrast, there are today a growing number of professional service and research-driven companies and institutes that organize in entirely virtual manners (while others have committed to embracing permanent remote work as an option within a hybrid framework). Even prior to Covid, many multinational organizations leaned heavily on virtual platforms and interactions as core elements of workspace governance. During the pandemic, moreover, research demonstrates a multiplicity of patterns and variables shaping comfort and performance in virtual settings (Teevan 2021; Yang and al.2021).

At minimum, in today's environment it would seem overly simplistic and counter-productive to characterize virtual platforms and interactions as categorically inferior to in-person settings and interactions. As McKinsey Consulting advises 'it's time for leaders to get real about hybrid':

> *Instead of directing a rah-rah return to the office, leaders would be wise to focus on deeper listening and meeting their workforces where they are today. It will be important for leaders to acknowledge, for instance, that they don't have all the answers—as their companies transition to hybrid working models, they will still be trying to discover what the right longer-term working model (the one that works for most employees) will be. It will also be important for leaders to signal that they hope to make their employees partners in designing the future of how their companies work (De Smet and al. 2021).*

For most organizations today, the hybrid experience remains a novel one. For governments especially – with limited pre-Covid experience with flexible and virtual work models, any enthusiasm for a wider embracement of hybrid workspace models seems to be accompanied and even tempered by significant uncertainty as to what lies ahead. What seems to be understandably lacking at this nascent phase of its emergence is an underlying playbook in terms of requirements, leadership, and execution. Who should be involved in developing any specific hybrid playbook (or playbooks) speaks to the importance of strengthening employee engagement.

*Lack of employee engagement:*

One source of anxiety regarding future uncertainty and hybrid readiness is a deficiency of engagement felt by many employees, and most especially amongst mid-career public sector managers who shared their views on this topic. Consistent with Clarke's

characterization of closed government traditionalism, guidance and directives during the pandemic (through 2020 and 2021) for workplace restrictions and flexible remote arrangements (as well as a high-level pledge to explore hybrid options in the future in some, to be determined manner) have generally been ordained in a top-down manner from senior managerial levels (Clarke 2019/2020).

Despite the imposed continuance of flexibility in the near term (likely through at least the first half of 2022 as Omicron persists), many elements of the underlying ethos of government – particularly at the apex of senior leadership, are closely aligned with the traditional, in-person office setting. Such is the comfort zone of Ministerial offices, central agencies, and many executive level managers. In other words, for most senior officials in government, the most pervasive vibe emanating from senior echelons leans toward an acceptance of hybrid as a necessary but mainly transitory phase, rather than viewing the pandemic as fuller and more strategic inflection point.

Nonetheless, most all senior officials interviewed for this report also indicated that they were making considerable efforts to informally grant degrees of freedom to their subordinates, even as many felt some constraints in doing so. This point is further supported by the sentiments of mid-level managers. Although there were no reports of overt pressure to return to the office (or to direct their staff to do so) if less than fully comfortable (even between peaks in wave infection rates), most felt that there had so far been very limited or no dialogue with senior leadership as to what the medium-term outlook would be - in terms of remote and hybrid arrangements.

This limited communication may well reflect a limited understanding by senior management of the shifts underway and evolving sentiments within organizations. As an example, a Gartner Hybrid Work Employee survey of 4,000 employees globally, for example, found that that 75% of executive leaders believe they are already operating within a culture of flexibility, yet only 57% of employees indicate that their organizational culture embraces flexible work (Baker 2021).

One reality that should not be overlooked here is that very few executives in any sector, and arguably most especially government, have much first-hand knowledge with a culture of flexible work since it has not been mainstream to organizational dynamics. It is especially unlikely to be the personal experience and trajectory of those occupying senior positions at present, aside from periodic, Covid-induced shifts to remote work.

While simply continuing to function through mainly virtual means during the pandemic may understandably be viewed by many senior managers as something of a success, and as evidence of a flexible work culture, it falls well short of a fuller endorsement of hybrid arrangements as a basis for governance renewal and a more empowered and agile workforce. An absence of meaningful employee engagement will invariably widen this gulf – and further complicate future determinations of hybrid's scope and potential.

*Heightened competition for talent and skills (within and across sectors):*

A threat for governments in not adopting hybrid workspace models lies in a weakening of capacities for recruitment and retention, particularly if more flexible and accommodative work arrangements become closer to the norm of the private sector. This threat is particularly acute to many facets of digital government (data management and governance, cyber-security, service innovation, to name but a few) which are notable for significant degrees of cross-over of key individuals from one sector to the other. For example, many Chief Information Officer (CIO) and Chief Digital Officers in the public sector have private sector experience (in 2021 the CDO of the Province of BC left for private industry while the Government of Canada recruited in this same year a new CIO from Air Canada).

More broadly still, the cadre of senior managers responsible for digital service strategies within governments encompasses a significant proportion of individuals with industry experience, while the wider digital government eco-system further includes many consultants and contractors who work for one or both sectors as projects arise. With the acceleration of technological change, these sorts of synergies can only be expected to deepen and augment in importance.

As hybrid strategies become more mainstream, governments face two forms of competitive pressures simultaneously in terms of recruitment and retention: first, comparisons and choices that workers may have between sectors; and secondly, competitive options within the public sector (perhaps especially so at the federal level but also across government levels).

As May's passage described earlier in the report, there is an opportunity for a more geographically distributed workforce where locational living within cities (or reasonable commuting distance) is no longer a positional requirement, and there has been some recent antidotal reporting of governments beginning to offer locational and scheduling flexibility in recruitment postings. These offerings may well reflect rising competitive pressures tied to the growth of flexible work arrangements in the private sector, notably in the technology and financial services industries (Shopify and the Royal Bank of Canada as two prominent examples), as companies have been overall quicker and more eager to embrace hybrid permanency in looking beyond the pandemic.

The Bank of Canada was one of the first public sector entities to announce a formalization of hybrid work arrangements: most workers will be granted the flexibility to work from home for up to 50% of the time over continuous two-week periods (Bloomberg 2021). It is important to note that this particular model still necessitates that most staff live within commuting distances of Ottawa-based head offices, albeit with heightened scheduling and locational flexibility.

Heightened competitive pressures for talent and skills will only intensify for core government departments if there remains ongoing lack of clarity in terms of what the overall mindset and approach of governments will be. It also matters that Covid's acceleration of digitization is especially encouraging younger and more educated workers to reconsider their career development trajectories – in terms of time, location, ambition, and work-life balance (Braier 2021; Gratton 2021; Nixon 2021).

At the very least, in July 2021 the Government of Canada conveyed a sense of openness in this regard: 'Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC) will continue to work with deputies to analyze their organizational footprint and begin to plan for their workplace of the future, especially those contemplating flexible, hybrid workforce models.'[4] In contrast to this trepid beginning, the UK's national government's creation of a Flexible Working Taskforce has generated a multi-stakeholder dialogue and a detailed set of guidelines for hybrid organizations (an initiative commissioned by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, the world's oldest human resources association with more than 150,000 members globally from across all sectors). Beyond the value of the vision and the guidance emanating from this initiative, what is also notable of the taskforce is the strong stakeholder participation from all sectors. *A summary of the guidelines derived from the workings of the Taskforce is presented as an appendix to this report.*

*Cognition and mental health:*

Finding work-life balance is not solely an issue for younger and for more educated workers, but rather it matters to everyone. Beyond the notion of balance, how individuals adapt and cope with the changing and accelerated digitized environment due to the pandemic will be significant in shaping hybrid potentials and experiences going forward. Importantly, during the pandemic remote work has been a blessing for some, and a curse for others (with many experiencing a mixture of both).

A decade ago, McKinsey and Company published an insightful commentary entitled, 'Recovering from Information Overload' (Dean and Webb 2011). The piece, geared to executive level managers, urged a devising of personal strategies and capacities to deal with growing volumes of email as well as online information sources and the resulting impacts on cognition, mental health, and performance.

> *Many senior executives literally have two overlapping workdays: the one that is formally programmed in their diaries and the one "before, after, and in-between," when they disjointedly attempt to grab spare moments with their laptops or smart phones, multitasking in a vain effort to keep pace with the information flowing toward them (ibid.).*

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[4] From a joint statement issued by the Chief Human Resources Officers of Treasury Board and Public Services and Procurement Canada along with the President of Shared Services Canada. Source: https://www.canada.ca/en/government/publicservice/covid-19/approach-advance-flexible-work.html

The article goes on to lament multitasking as counter-productive in the face of cascading distractions and demands: 'A body of scientific evidence demonstrates fairly conclusively that multitasking makes human beings less productive, less creative, and less able to make good decisions' (ibid.). Among their suggestions, the authors suggest that three areas of personal investment and skills development necessary for coping and thriving in a digital environment: focus, filtering, and forgetting.

As the McKinsey passage notes, the science is compelling in linking Internet connectivity, mobile devices, information overload, and multi-tasking.[5] For many public servants working remotely for the first time during the pandemic, the corresponding challenges of coping have become more acute. Coping, of course, is a vital prerequisite to thriving.

Indeed, two specific observations are warranted with respect to the McKinsey commentary of a decade ago. First, its warnings for executives now arguably apply to most every worker employed within a large organization and equipped with a smart device (or more likely, several of them). Secondly, large bureaucratic organizations (not solely governments but often especially governments) are particularly prone to information overload risks, most notably from massive email generation and the corresponding cognitive and physical challenges of focusing, filtering, and forgetting (ibid.).

The pandemic-induced shift to working from home for many public servants has only accentuated these risks, while additional demands of screen time stem from frequent video conference meetings and electronic file sharing required to facilitate them. Yet for some workers, especially those younger and/or more digitally savvy, effective filtering is more readily achievable (a variety of digital apps and tools have been created), or potentially more naturally occurring (digital comfort levels and skill sets vary for a myriad of reasons). For others as well, there may also be comfort and value in working from home – particularly in terms of focus, as fewer distractions of the sort that characterize office life can enhance concentration and productivity.

Shortly after McKinsey's contributions, reflecting on Mayer's ill-fated attempts to ordain all Yahoo workers back into offices, and invoking these sorts of dynamics and differences that are germane to current pandemic conditions and the choices that potentially lie ahead, Clive Thompson of Wired Magazine observes:

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[55] One prominent researcher in this regard is Daniel Levitin. For an overview of his research findings and implications for neurological development and cognition, please see a discussion of his published work in the UK's Guardian Newspaper. Source: https://www.theguardian.com/science/2015/jan/18/modern-world-bad-for-brain-daniel-j-levitin-organized-mind-information-overload

*'Telework makes you more productive, and working together makes you more creative. And therein lies a paradox. The real challenge for people who run modern organizations is understanding what type of thinking they want to do, not where to do it' (Thompson 2013).*

Although not everyone would or should find agreement with these assertions, they do underscore the value and even necessity of a hybrid approach that seeks to blend and balance the potential benefits from working independently (typically at home but potentially elsewhere) versus collaboratively and in-person. At the same time, the pandemic experience has shown that a least some of the creativity and innovation that people have generally associated with physical interactions can also be replicated virtually, provided the appropriate mechanisms and supports are in place (Choudhury 2020; Baker and al. 20121; KPMG 2021).

Devising appropriate mechanisms and supports – along with determining the overall balance between in-person and virtual processes, necessitates a basic recognition that different people think and interact differently for a host of reasons. This recognition has typically been lacking or stunted within traditional bureaucratic settings, where the demands of presenteeism have been prioritized over individual sensitivity and customization. By contrast, Thompson's wisdom is worth reiteration: *'The real challenge for people who run modern organizations is understanding what type of thinking they want to do, not where to do it'.*

Another important challenge for organizations is to enable resilience and compassion for its members, especially through times of trauma (including a global pandemic which is itself a source of trauma even as it spawns a myriad of others). Even as hierarchical bureaucracies have long been criticized for dehumanizing workers, in recent years most large organizations have sought to provide more and better support and care for its workers. Yet the nature of this support and care has been disrupted by Covid and the widescale shifting to remote work settings, with a corresponding risk of anxiety stemming from isolationism. The President of Shopify, for example, has spoken openly about his own mental health struggles in being an extroverted leader constrained by home isolation (Finkelstein 2021). It also bears noting, however, that Shopify has declared that 'the era of office centricity over' and hybrid and even permanently remote working arrangements will be fully embraced going forward.

Although there is no overarching reasoning to presume that hybrid organizations will be inherently any more or less caring and compassionate than their predecessors, the nature and form of the care and compassion provided to individuals and teams will invariably change, which can create opportunities for some and risks for others. For example, online provisioning of mental health support has augmented considerably during the pandemic, yet these online platforms may further aggravate isolationism and screen fatigue for some, while others may well thrive in virtual settings. As with the

Shopify example, physiology and personality traits play important roles, as with introverted and extroverted individuals experiencing virtual, in-person, and hybrid settings in different ways and with varied impacts.

A key element of the hybrid imperative, therefore, is affording novel and expanded opportunities for employee support – and to also enable employees to engage with one another in forging collective forms of social capital that only underpin capacities for performance innovation but also foster more humane and inclusive organizations. To quote Dalhousie University's Dr. Vincent Agyapong, chair of the psychiatric department: 'I've always said the greatest source of protection for mental well-being is really focusing your attention on helping other people' (Anderssen 2021). Though both informal peer support mechanisms and more formalized support programs, reimagining how hybrid organizations can build a caring and inclusive workforce is essential (and central to building inclusion, a key theme below).

*In sum, hybrid affords organizations a tremendously powerful - and in many cases long overdue, opportunity to empower individual workers in innovative ways that reflect variance in physiologies, cognition, job requirements, and personal and family circumstances. There is the potential to provide employees and managers with a strengthened voice in determining where, when, and how best to conduct themselves while pursuing and aligning individual and collective objectives.*

*In seeking resilience and compassion, hybrid organizations must strive to nurture and leverage, in new ways, the enduring importance of human connectedness, empathy, and care. As health and safety considerations alter in-person experiences, new investments in both technological infrastructure and organizational culture must be made in fostering an inclusive ethos through new mixtures and alignment across physical and virtual settings.*

## 4) THREE DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Between the persistence of Covid and the emerging opportunities stemming from more flexible organizational architectures and workspace innovation, the case for embracing a hybrid workspace strategy is a persuasive one - arguably an imperative for governments going forward.

If governments are to step up and proactively embrace hybrid as an opportunity, an underlying set of design principles is necessary. The principles suggested here are not meant as a definitive or complete framing of what is a complex and multi-faceted set of challenges, but rather as broad directional guidance for public sector organizations to approach and frame hybrid's potential. As a complement to this broad conceptual framing, appendix two provides one useful source of more practical guidance and specific recommendations in many areas well aligned with these principles.

The three principles presented here are *differentiation; engagement; and inclusion.* While none of these principles are new to the public sector, each represents a crucial dimension to leveraging hybrid's potential as a strategic opportunity for human empowerment and governance innovation.

### 4.1 Differentiation:

Many aspects of differentiation have long characterized the public sector given the myriad of functions and organizational bodies comprising a 'government' for any given jurisdiction. At the same time, across this diversified portfolio of activities and actors, there is also an important place for some degree of standardization or harmonization in providing a basis of coordination and commonality in governance and operations across a range of areas including (to name but a few): values and ethics; hiring, promoting, and renumeration processes; training and professional development; dispute settlements and recourse; and many others. Along with these frameworks that shape how public sector workers conduct their duties, there is also the pursuit of shared public interest outcomes and performance objectives as determined by political bodies and implemented through central agencies.

In a related manner, the research literature on digital government has long recognized tensions between differentiated and devolutionary approaches to governance innovation - and more centralized or at least centrally coordinated architectures for shared infrastructure, data management, and integrative and collaborative efforts of one sort or another (Dunleavy and al. 2006; Roy 2006/2013/2019/2020; Gasco 2014; Greve 2015; Ubaldi and al. 2019; Clarke and al. 2017; Lindquist 2018; Clarke 2019). Governments and inter-governmental research forums such as the OECD have also recognized these sorts of tensions (OECD 2015; Government of Canada 2019). Accordingly, the challenge of striking an appropriate balance between differentiation and standardization is not new, though it has been altered by the advent of digital connectivity.

Within this sort of continuum that shall always remain an underlying feature of public sector governance, there must nonetheless be recognition of a close alignment between hybrid workspace design and strong degrees of organizational flexibility and experimentation. This alignment, moreover, is dependent upon the principle of differentiation. Although government-wide policies and planning frameworks remain important elements of any workforce and workspace architecture (including hybrid), in modern and adaptive organizations employees should be more unified by shared missions and objectives than by physical office structures and similarly regimented locational schedules.

This point was underscored several years ago in a conversation with a senior government official who undertook an interchange assignment with a global consultancy. When asked about the main difference across both sectors, this person replied that while the nature of the work was quite similar, how it was pursued varied sharply. Partly due to geographically distributed teams, and partly due to a stronger client-centric ethos, the industry experience was much more predicated upon performance and accountability for outcomes – whereas the government experience was more consumed and shaped by procedural processes and in-person meetings.

*A hybrid approach necessitates a heightened emphasis on performance over process – and an empowerment of organizational units and managers to determine how best to structure and pursue individual and collective tasks.*

Although important to recognize the uniqueness of public sector governance, there is little question that bureaucratic rigidities have constrained innovation generally – and the evolution of digital government (Roy 2013; Clarke 2019). There is also wide recognition that as governments become more complex and more digitized, finding a renewed alignment between accountability mechanisms for process and control, for performance measurement, and for learning and adaptation requires a lessened reliance on traditional authoritative structures (Roy 2008/2020; Paquet and Wilson 2016; Lindquist and Huse 2017; Clarke 2019; Lindquist 2020).

With respect to differentiation and hybrid models, writing for Harvard Business Review, Gratton makes the case that managers must consider and address four distinct elements of worker and managerial experiences and perspectives:

- *i) jobs and tasks;*
- *ii) employee preferences;*
- *iii) projects and workflows; and*
- *iv) inclusion and fairness (Gratton 2021).*

The fourth point, inclusion, is returned to separately below, but it bears noting here that within a large, diverse, and digitally driven public sector, variation across many aspects of tasks, preferences, and workflows is to be expected and encouraged (albeit within the confines of shared infrastructure and policies). In terms of the potential for hybrid models to take hold, the overarching principle of differentiation is premised on

recognition that any recasting and realignment of individual work styles and processes within collective governance mechanisms cannot be ordained and imposed in a top-down manner. Experimentation is essential - and it must draw upon employee experience and engagement. Consequently, engagement is the second key principle for the design and deployment of hybrid strategies.

## 4.2 Engagement:

Consistent with many facets of differentiation and innovation, a hybrid mentality and organizational culture must be predicated upon a fundamental belief in the commitment of employees to reshape their own work environment for the better. At the same time, managerial capacities to leverage this commitment through dialogue and to align flexible work arrangements with collective structures and pursuits are equally essential.

While direction setting from senior leadership matters crucially, most notably in signalling an overarching embracement of hybrid principles and priorities, detailed policies and designs must be crafted and implemented in a more bottom-up manner. Along with traditional tools like employee surveys (that enable individual rather than interactive participation), discursive capacities involving all employees must also be deployed to forge a renewed and shared mindset, the basis of a 'managerial charter' for the hybrid experience (CIPD 2021). Yet as discussed in the previous section above, a lack of engagement is already a source of anxiety and concern for many employees, greatly clouding hybrid's potential.

Along with whether engagement happens, equally important is how it is conducted. During the Covid pandemic, there have been many examples of Deputies and other senior leaders conducting virtual town halls often much more about informing than engaging. In some instances, employees are even asked to turn off their video feeds to lessen the potential distractions for the speaker (at least during the delivery of opening remarks). Not surprisingly, the typical response for many is to passively allow these presentations to run in the background while multi-tasking and focusing elsewhere. While this antidote is hardly indicative of many genuine engagement efforts, it does reflect the broad managerial and authoritative contours of public sector governance and their close alignment with top-down communications (i.e. a structured virtual town hall with prepared remarks and limited questions), rather than meaningful participation and collective engagement (McNutt 2014; Clarke 2019).

With respect to how employee engagement has been impacted by Covid, evidence to date from across both government and industry is mixed. The 2021 State of the Global Workplace (conducted annually by Gallup found a modest decline in overall employee engagement (Gallup 2021). While the 2021 State of Employee Engagement by Work Buzz found that the same proportion of organizations had reported an increase in employee engagement as a decrease. The latter report, based upon online surveys with primarily British respondents, also found starker challenges for those organizations with frontline workers than those mostly office based (Backhouse and Frost 2021).

For governments with large cadres of both office and frontline workers, these findings underscore how differentiation and engagement are closely inter-related, and the futility of a one size fits all approach to hybrid design. Encouragingly, this same report found that the highest Human Resource priorities for organizations during the pandemic were closely aligned with many key features of the hybrid experience including (the top five):

- *i) improving employee engagement and the overall employee experience;*

- *ii) supporting employee wellbeing/overall wellness;*

- *iii) creating diverse and inclusive workplaces;*

- *iv) improving retention of employee talent ; and*

- *v) facilitating remote or hybrid working (ibid.).*

Research conducted by Deloitte, undertaken in North American is similarly aligned, with data suggesting that proactively addressing employee well-being and engagement is central to employee well being and the countering of the negative impacts of remote work that have emerged during the pandemic (Braier and al. 2021). With respect to the links between Covid, hybrid and effective adaption, this report further articulates what had been long understood prior to Covid but what becomes more essential during the pandemic and in looking ahead:

*Organizations that focus on employee engagement see higher levels of productivity, and other benefits such as lower attrition and higher innovation. Conversely, organizations with low engagement see lower productivity and higher levels of attrition and burnout (ibid).*

For the Government of Canada, the 2020 Employee Survey conducted on behalf of the employer itself (between Nov 2020 and Jan 2021) found generally strong levels of job satisfaction and being valued in their work environment, albeit with new sources of stress tied to the pandemic, notably risk of exposure to Covid, balancing work and caregiving responsibilities, feeling disconnected from colleagues, and difficulty accessing work tools or networks (Government of Canada 2020)). Importantly, 83% of employees indicated that their immediate supervisor supported the use of flexible work hours during the pandemic (ibid.).

Yet the survey does not address the viewpoints of employees toward actual employee engagement exercises or to hybrid possibilities going forward. There is something of a disconnect between job satisfaction reported routinely in many internal surveys of this sort, and the uncertainly that many employees are also conveying about whether their organizations are prepared to embrace permanent hybrid solutions as well as their readiness in doing so (as cited in the prior section). The federal government survey, moreover, did not ask respondents about their in-person versus remote work

preferences going forward, while it is notable that 17% of public servants expressed a feeling of disconnection from colleagues as a source of stress, consistent with survey findings presented in the introduction suggesting most workers prefer a blended environment over a binary choice between home and office (ibid.).

A key role for employee engagement, then, will be finding ways to bridge these spheres, and to leverage employee satisfaction as a basis for collective adaptation and improvement. For engagement to be effective, it is equally important that it be predicated upon open and inclusive conversations as much as quantitative and individualized surveys. Here again is where middle managers face the heightened pressures (and likely the most stress and anxiety) in following guidance from above while attempting to balance the diversity of human traits and tasks within their respective ranks.

While the late 2021 guidance from the President of the Treasury Board specifically invokes the primary responsibility of Deputy Ministers in this regard (to ensure a safe and effective workplace in balancing any return to the office with remote work flexibility), it is largely absent on guidance and support for experimentation and innovation as a way forward. At the same time, given the underlying traditionalism of the Deputy experience (as discussed above) that inclines to a return to in-person office settings, coupled with what may be a limited and somewhat superficial comfort of internal employee surveys, hybrid innovation may face significant headwinds.

Rather than seeking to leverage creativity and experimentation from within, the default mentality and orientation of government leans more toward top-down risk mitigation and incremental reform. It bears noting that these attributes can be important sources of public value creation during a time of crisis, as with a global pandemic, especially in terms of immediate responses, but they can also stymie the emergence of new and more adaptive governance models that even governments have long claimed are more suited to growing societal complexity (Roy 2008/2013; McNutt 2014; Mergel 2016; Millard 2015; Clarke and al. 2017; Clarke 2019; Lindquist 2020).

In other words, employee engagement is not only essential to any initial hybrid design but also to continual learning and adaptation. To quote MIT's Erin Kelly: 'When employees have a sense of choice and control over when, how, and where they do their work, it's really valuable for their well-being, their excitement for the job, and their commitment to the company' (Braier 2021). The same, of course, holds true for any large organization – public, private, or non-profit, with the adaptiveness, effectiveness, and performance impacts over time of hybrids model closely intertwined with employee engagement capacities.

Engagement and dialogue are also critically important to addressing the mental health challenges and concerns that have become more prevalent within modern-day organizations – and how hybrid arrangements and infrastructure realities can better equip workers with the knowledge and tools to navigate the opportunities and risks of a

more digitized, constantly connected, and multi-locational environment (as discussed in the previous section). Training and support for mid-level managers is viewed as especially important in enabling managers to facilitate dialogue and experimentation within their own ranks while sharing successes and failures with others across the organization (Buntine 2021). Creating a manager's charter' for hybrid work environments can help to codify and communicate expectations and roles for managers and team members, while also ensuring that the formation of the charter itself is a vessel for engagement (ibid.).

Beyond the organization and conduct of individual employees and teams of workers, the prominence of unionization in government also merits recognition and attention as labour organizations will be instrumental to employee engagement efforts. It is unavoidable that this aspect of human resource governance in the public sector will add complexity given the diverse set of representative organizations and the many different collective agreements at play, while one can also anticipate that attitudes and openness to hybrid models will vary across professions and organizational ranks.

Seeking to learn and benefit from variation, experimentation, and adaptation will further underpin and enjoin the first and second design principles (differentiation and engagement). There will invariably be new and difficult challenges for labour organizations to become engaged partners in the development of hybrid solutions and to balance standardization in many elements of collective agreements, with flexibility and more tailored working arrangements across a diverse and technologically agile workforce. Whether and how labour organizations themselves function as hybrid organizations will also shape their own perspective and their roles in shaping hybrid models for their public sector memberships.

### 4.3 Inclusion:

Closely interrelated with principles and capacities of differentiation and engagement, inclusion is the third principle of hybrid design. For some time, diversity, equity, and inclusion have been recognized as prominent features of workforce modernization efforts and human resource systems, especially within the public sector. An important question now becomes whether Covid and the pursuit of hybrid arrangements will strengthen the pursuit of these goals or rather constrain progress.

With respect to gender, for example, there is evidence of Covid further exasperating gender inequities globally (Canadian Press 2021). Due to Covid, the World Economic Forum now estimates global gender parity to be achieved in 135.6 years, up from roughly 100 years as the estimate prior to the pandemic (Ng 2021). Within Canada, although women have made considerable gains within public sector ranks[6], wide

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[6] Canada leads the G20 in female senior managers, with nearly one half of all positions now held by women (Hunt 2020). Nonetheless, of 88 Deputies and Assistant Deputy Ministers who have signed a public pledge to build a 'healthy, respectful and supportive' work environment (as of mid-December 2021), 36 are female versus 52 male. Source:

gender disparities persist across all sectors, most notably in private sector executive and board level positions (Osler 2021).

Although hybrid models can be important in facilitating added flexibility for women to advance their careers and find a better balance across professional and home life duties (Sandberg with Scovell 2013), it is equally important that hybrid arrangements be extended to, and utilized by men as well, avoiding a two-tired workforce and workspace of predominantly in-person workers (male) and partially remote (female) workers (Partridge 2021). This sort of segmentation could stymie or even lessen the considerable gains made by women within the Canadian public sector.

Current organizational contexts are often even more daunting for racialized minorities – particularly at senior levels of organizational ranks which still tend to lean heavily Caucasian. As of March 2020, for instance, the federal government reports that from a pool of 6,212 executive level positions, there are no non-Caucasian ethnic groups representing even 3% with most minorities at much lower levels (including Black at 1.6%, Non-White Lain American at 0.3% and persons of mixed origin at 1.3%, the highest category being South Asian / East Indian at 2.8%).[7] Similarly weak representation levels amongst senior ranks characterize Indigenous Canadians and persons with disabilities as well.

The LGBQT2 community is a similar case in point, estimated by Statistics Canada to comprise at least 4% of the country's population (ages 15 and above), with one third under the age of twenty-five (Statistics Canada 2021b). Despite little data as to the proportion of government managers that identify with this community, it stands to reason that the number is considerable – and a growing segment of the overall talent pool for the public sector.

Now widely understood but vastly unrealized, the critical interface between diversity and innovation goes beyond acceptance and tolerance. A culture of inclusion seeks widened and alternative perspectives and viewpoints as a basis for novel ideas and approaches. 'When minorities form a critical mass and leaders value differences, all employees can find senior people to go to bat for compelling ideas and can persuade those in charge of budgets to deploy resources to develop those ideas' (Hewlett and al. 2013).

The inter-relatedness between hybrid and inclusion depends upon may factors, including the underlying importance of physical proximity in historically marginalizing many from career advancement opportunities and leadership positions. *Two important*

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https://www.canada.ca/en/government/publicservice/wellness-inclusion-diversity-public-service/health-wellness-public-servants/mental-health-workplace/mental-health-workplace-our-commitments/deputy-ministers-engagement.html

[7] Source (Government of Canada, Treasury Board Secretariat): https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/services/innovation/human-resources-statistics/diversity-inclusion-statistics/distribution-public-service-canada-employees-designated-sub-group-occupational-category-visible-minorities.html

*questions in this regard: first, to what degree are workforce inequalities intertwined with physical proximity and the time and locational confines of office structures (i.e. presenteeism); and secondly, how can hybrid solutions enhance inclusion?*

In response, it is essential to once again underline the fact that hybrid is not a solely binary choice between office and home. Rather a hybrid workspace encompasses both in-person and virtual settings that are *valued equally* in terms of their accessibility, usage, and perceived importance. If staff feel as though video conferencing facilitates as much access – or perhaps even improved access and interaction with their colleagues and their managers, at least one potential element of exclusion is lessened. As one illuminating report from an admittedly subjective source – namely a provider of video conferencing solutions (Voodle) observes:

> *Concern about not belonging can drive employees to hide parts of themselves they fear will be detrimental to their success. While no demographic is exempt from such worries, this anxiety tends to impact historically marginalized groups to a greater degree. Of note, during the pandemic (Voodle 2021).*

The report recommends a 'hyper-focus' on inclusion – and the potential for video tools to assist in this regard, provided that appropriate training and usage resources are invested (ibid). One example of this emphasis is MCAN Mortgage Corporation, a Canadian financial services company that has deployed virtual gatherings through the pandemic to celebrate a variety of religious and cultural occasions, while also encouraging employees to engage with one anther to discuss both professional and personal aspects of their lives (Peters 2022). The stated aim of senior management is to foster a 'family' like culture of belonging and support, and it is perhaps notable and not unrelated that 60 percent of the senior leadership team is female and 70 percent of its 120 employees identify as BIPOC: Black, Indigenous, Persons of Colour) (ibid).

The purpose, utility, duration, and frequency of virtual meeting is also an important theme examined by Voodle. Their report's survey found that 65% of employees found that one half or less of their Zoom calls were pertinent to their job. A potent combination of video overload, screen fatigue, and relentless email production is one that impacts cognitive performance and mental health (as discussed in the previous section above).

Building digital inclusion – at least partly through video-based platforms and tools, means being both strategic and creative in balancing where, when, why, and how people meet. Voodle calls for the creation of new 'digital cultural spaces' to facilitate collaboration and inclusion in novel ways and to integrate these virtual spaces into the wider fabric of workspace governance (as with the aforementioned MCAN Mortgage example). These spaces can also assist with the unique challenges of onboarding of new team members in a predominantly or even fully virtual environment (Golob 2021).

While video platforms and tools are just one element in a complex inter-relationship between hybrid models and inclusion outcomes, the underlying logic here is that embracing diversity and building inclusion are processes that must have both in-person

and virtual dimensions – and that balance and alignment across these spheres must be proactively shaped rather than passively assumed. In doing so, Samuel and Robertson, writing in Harvard Business Review, suggest five critical questions to guide efforts:

- *Who's spending more time at the office and who's spending more time at home?*

- *Who gets to choose when to be at the office?*

- *How does time in the office shape the path to promotion?*

- *How are remote management tactics used?*

- *How does time in or out of the office predict employee engagement and retention (Samuel and Robertson 2021)?*

The central importance of inclusion within hybrid efforts becomes clearer, and the collection, presentation, and assessment of data across each of these questions becomes a basis for better aligning human resource management and digital governance planning. At the same time, the inter-relationship between engagement and inclusion is equally important. Any data gathering and assessment and survey techniques must also be accompanied by employee wellness and support mechanisms aligned with hybrid arrangements and their unique realities and pressure points.

For persons with disabilities, as one example, the links between engagement, mental health support, and inclusion are central to the important conversations at hand. Quoting Jill Houghton, the President and CEO of Disability:IN:

> *Companies should evaluate their mental health benefits by asking what their employees need. That's one silver lining of the pandemic: it's created an opportunity for us to be more open about mental health, which is closely linked to disabilities…There's a lot of fear about going back to work, and what happens next ... we need to make sure disabilities stay part of the conversation about work (Smith, M. 2021).*

As with other minority groups, strengthening inclusion for persons with disabilities ultimately depends upon more hiring, thereby expanding their influence and impacts. In addition to considerations of existing workforce, a hugely important opportunity for public sector organizations lies in a potential talent pool expansion for the recruitment of new managers. As May discusses (earlier in this report), hybrid affords a unique opportunity for governments to surmount geographical limitations and extend workforce diversity with inclusion goals in mind.

For Provincial and Territorial Governments, most especially smaller and more remote ones, this opportunity arguably becomes necessity to viably compete for specialized skills and talent where diversity and education tends to be proportionally much more concentrated in the country's largest urban centres. *The perspective of local governments – and some of the unique risks and opportunities at the municipal level, as*

*well as the implications for federalist governance arrangements are discussed in an appendix to this report.*

An additional dimension to building inclusion that should not be overlooked is the diversity of professional and educational disciplines that can bring crucial perspectives and insights in shaping hybrid strategies and workspaces. As this discussion has underscored, interdependencies across human resource systems and digital planning efforts are intensifying, while each of these spheres itself encompasses a range of managerial, policy, and planning functions and perspectives.

Hybrid workforce planning, therefore, must itself be a diverse process. Even prior to Covid, the nexus between digital innovation and human diversity was widely recognized (Clarke and al. 2017; Clarke 2019; Cukier 2019). In response to Covid, lessening disciplinary boundaries and siloed organizational structures, and creating more collaborative governance mechanisms predicated upon heightened diversity is essential. Hybrid workspace strategies can create additional opportunities for doing so, by widening talent pools and opportunities for participation and engagement across all levels of organizational structures.

Through this lens, there is also the potential for hybrid workspaces to facilitate novel and more varied career progression patterns – deepening performance synergies between innovation and diversity. In place of the traditional 'corporate ladder' that features work styles and demands that have tended to reinforce historical conventions and biases, the creation of a genuine mixture of in-person and virtual venues for most all aspects of organizational life can democratize access to decision-making processes and job opportunities that would otherwise be less accessible (Reuveni 2021; Taylor and al. 2021).

In other words, diversity can widen inclusion but only if meaningful hybrid strategies (rooted in the three design principles presented here) can overcome the bureaucratic inertia of a 'proximity bias':

> *Studies have long shown the effect of 'proximity bias' means that workers who spend more time with managers are more likely to rise through the ranks. While it leads to problems like presenteeism and burnout, experts believe that some workers will think that showing up to the office is a sacrifice worth making, if they want to get ahead (Lufkin 2021).*

A tremendous opportunity from hybrid innovation lies in freeing both individual and organizational performance capacities from this proximity bias. Additionally, how organizations facilitate personal growth and professional development necessitates an alignment of hybrid and inclusive values to better to respond to a more diverse and digitally enabled society with an appropriately reflective and empowered public service:

*Just as career paths are becoming less linear, so, too, are the ways employees learn and develop new skills. Today, career development is complex, occurring across multiple mediums inside and outside of the workplace. It's driven as much by employee passions and interests as it is by the parameters of their job description (ibid.).*

In stark contrast to extending hierarchical control and surveillance from the office setting into the virtual realm, a hybrid model should seek to empower employees with the tools and freedom to devise their own working arrangements that better reflect their own personal attributes, talents, and circumstances. While some negotiation is essential in balancing individualization with the collective aspects any organization, a hybrid proposition views negotiation as a natural and positive feature of a more agile and empowered workforce rather than an exceptional arrangement to be tolerated.

As with any significant governance reform, senior management must set an appropriate tone in terms of actions and interactions. Devising integrative leadership mechanism that transcend traditional people and technology functional silos is particularly important along with appropriate Ministerial directives to support integrative efforts.

*In sum, the three overarching principles of differentiation, engagement, and inclusion provide a basis for innovative hybrid workspace design – and the fostering of a more inclusive and adaptive workforce.*

## 5) FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

From both practitioner and scholarly vantage points, there are at least six critical sets of determinants that are likely to shape the potential acceptance and development of hybrid strategies within the public sector in the near term: i) political leadership; ii) organizational culture and governance; iii) human cognition and digital interfacing; iv) cyber-security and digital resilience; v) climate change and ecological sensitivity; and vi) training and skills development.

First, the nature of political leadership is intertwined with any aspect of digital government and the relative balance between traditionalism and transformation, while at the same time political leader are determining Covid response strategies broadly and specifically in terms of the conduct of the public service (i.e. vaccine mandates and testing regimes, work from home guidance, etc.). At the same time, if politicians revert to predominantly in-person dynamics in their own interactions (within legislatures and committees but also in terms of Ministerial staff interactions with senior public servants), there will be implications and lessened degrees of freedom around hybrid options (while conversely the reverse is equally true).

One notable provincial example is Noa Scotia where the recently elected Government had pledged, during the 2021 election, to allow virtual presentations to key legislative committees, only to reverse course after the election, before once again changing its mind and accepting this option as part of a hybrid model for Committee proceedings. In making his final decision in the matter, the Premier was swayed in large part by advocates for persons with disabilities who argued persuasively for the utility of a hybrid approach. Across the country, moreover, there has been enormous learning at all levels amongst elected officials in terms of functioning virtually (in some cases with freshly elected Municipal Councils never having formally met in person). Moving forward, the choices and actions made by politicians themselves, and their directives to public servants, will invariably shape the acceptance and pursuit of hybrid arrangements.

Secondly, in terms of organizational culture and governance, there are a host of challenges and concerns emanating from workforce surveys regarding organizational readiness and adaptation (some of which have been noted above), and complexity in this regard can only be expected to heighten as key decisions are made in terms of balancing a return to office settings with remote flexibility and their alignment within a hybrid model. The creation of a more seamless and blended set of workspaces with physical and virtual dimensions requires both technological infrastructure and tools and appropriate policies to deploy both in an inclusive manner. There is a significant body of research on virtual organizations that pre-dates Covid (as well as from during the pandemic), a source of insights for the design and execution of hybrid governance models (and their continual adaption). Empirical case study research on hybrid experiments – during the pandemic and in the months and years ahead, will further underpin understanding and improvement.

A similar point applies to the complex inter-relationship between hybrid strategies and inclusion. The discussion in this report is a small sampling of inclusion perspectives – an area of research that similarly predates Covid but one that is also being reshaped in many ways due to the pandemic. A particularly central area for investigation lies in the evolution of organizational culture within hybrid environments and whether and how organizational culture widens or narrows inclusion. Perhaps more so than in the past, this area would also benefit from inter-disciplinary investigation not just in scholarly terms but in providing more integrative perspectives within government from often siloed areas, notably human resource systems and digital infrastructure and strategies.

Thirdly, and closely related to the prior research direction, is the notion of human cognition and the capacities of workers to engage virtually within hybrid settings. It seems assured that any degree of hybrid approach necessitates a wider and more regularized usage of digital platforms and tools (for both those working remotely and those onsite in a physical location – still connecting to those remote). In doing so there are growing concerns about information overload, screen fatigue, worker isolation and digital surveillance, among other health and wellness risks.

Notions of health and safety within the workplace (now a set of workspaces if hybrid is to be adopted) will be dramatically altered, a challenge for government as an employer but also one as a health and safety regulator of other sectors as well. This area can also be expected to be an important feature of collective bargaining and the evolution of labour organizations in seeking to augment mental health concerns within more digitized and constantly connected settings. Ontario's proposed 2021 legislation that seeks to provide workers with the 'right to unplug' is indicative of this direction – that are bound to become more complex over time as hybrid work settings necessitate a refurbishment of not only regulatory frameworks for workspace conduct but also crafting new and partly virtual mechanisms for employee engagement in terms of the implementation of any updated guidelines and ongoing learning and adaptation.

Fourthly, the underlying digital infrastructure requirements of hybrid systems augment an already complex and costly set of digital security concerns for the public sector, notably stemming from the shift to cloud-based platforms for both backend functionality and employee workflows. The explosion of video platforms, project management software, and cloud-based data systems, and their alignment with on-site legacy infrastructure extends and greatly complicates the digital architecture of the public sector (and its many organizations with partially separate and partially shared digital systems). These evolving digital architectures give rise to a host of new questions in terms of investment upgrades, privacy and security, and overall digital resilience which becomes essential to the maintenance, agility, and performance of a hybrid model over time (Choudhury 2020).

In addition to the technical aspects of digital infrastructures conducive to hybrid arrangements, a thoughtful commentary on the hybrid experience implores CIO's to embrace a wider canvas of mental health considerations and organizational psychology,

reflecting how the underlying digital architecture is closely inter-related with both the second and third research directions above (Hancocks 2021). As also referenced above, an important aspect of devising hybrid strategies will be more collaboration and integrative actions between those responsible for digital and human resource capacities, areas that have typically functioned within separated organizational fiefdoms.

Fifthly, driven by climate change efforts growing in importance and urgency, the ecological aspects of hybrid arrangements are consequential for individualized decisions as well as wider societal implications for cities and urban planning. Covid has upended the notion of a 'smart city' by altering commuting patterns in ways that appear to be far reaching. One study of Montreal for example concludes that the downtown core is unlikely to ever recover to pre-pandemic levels of human activity, while at the same time the largest proportion of those workers who are returning to offices are doing so via automobile rather than public transportation, leading to the prospect of a public finance crisis for local transportation bodies (Van Praet 2021). Underscoring much of the discussion above, this same study also found strong support within the Montreal workforce for maintaining a significant level of work from home flexibility on an ongoing basis, further showcasing the importance of hybrid solutions across most all major sectors of the Montreal downtown economy, notably the public sector, financial services, and technology (ibid.).

Similarly complex patterns have been reported in many other Canadian cities, with governments key stakeholders in the future shaping of urban development (in a manner that also ties ecological and political considerations as governments invariably face pressures from downtown business sectors to rejuvenate areas depleted by the exodus of office workers). Climate change is driving a more ecologically sensitive lens of real estate usage and architectural planning – especially within downtown cores, even as Covid necessitates enlarged health and safety considerations. There is significant promise in digital technologies contributing to the upgrading of facilities and to the improved resilience of organizations and communities, as with robotic cleaning and artificial intelligence systems to track and manage air circulation and air quality as just two examples (JLL 2021).

The sixth research direction pertains to the training and skills development capacities of public servants – which have already been invariably altered in some ways by Covid, and which will require refurbishment for emergent hybrid realities. Many aspects of hybrid organizational models described above necessitate new skills and a new appreciation of working virtually – as well as in blended environments (Cukier 2019; Roy and al. 2019). Video-based capacities for shared decision-making and cyber-security safeguards for virtual environments are two notable examples, while mental health considerations of the evolving demands of hybrid environments also merit close examination and corresponding efforts at training individuals to better navigate potential forms of stress and anxiety. At the same time, then, how public servants learn is also

likely to become hybrid by necessity as more and more self-training already occurs online - while one can anticipate more shared learning experiences gravitating to fully or partially virtual settings (ibid.).

The evolution of self-learning and blended learning models was already apparent prior to Covid, as a significant proportion of workers in all sectors were displaying clear signs of dissatisfaction with traditional training and delivery models (ibid.). As hybrid work arrangements expand, and as virtualization deepens within educational and training sectors, the necessity for hybrid delivery models for professional development and skills training will only rise, a challenge for governments in terms of its own workforce but also for all sectors, adding to the importance of deepened collaboration across sectors as well (Turnbull 2020; Brooks and Turnbull 2020).

## 6) CONCLUSION

Looking ahead, Covid appears destined to become and remain endemic. As this evolution occurs, governments must recognize the risk of a lost opportunity - if the underlying reflex of government is to prioritize a return to physical office settings as the revived nucleus of workplace activity. Doing so with health and safety considerations top of mind would, in fact, accentuate this risk, if added protection layers and safeguards (notably masking, physical distancing, and spatial partitioning) were to reinforce even inadvertently many of bureaucratic rigidities that governments themselves have long sought to displace and modernize.

*In other words, even as a safer return to the workplace becomes feasible it will be less than optimal.* The risk of traditionalism impeding transformation is a constant feature of public sector governance reform. During 2021, a case can be made that the notion of 'hybrid' was already in the process of being abandoned by governments, or at least relegated to a temporary transition. Without question, it was under appreciated. Very few public sector leaders have thus far committed to hybrid permanency – especially as a strategic opportunity for the betterment of public sector governance.

Lessening the in-person proximity bias of the past suggests that going forward, many features of pre-Covid *workplace* innovation – notably openness, networking, and collaborative design, must instead be replicated at least partly and even significantly through virtual *workspaces*. Beyond the immediate necessity of doing so for health and safety reasons, the potential for sparking wider innovation and inclusion is equally important. Missing this opportunity, moreover, would condemn the public service to friction and mediocrity for some time to come.

Importantly, not all public sector jobs are conducive to hybrid arrangements and there are risks of deepened divides and even resentment between office workers and frontline staff. Nonetheless, this boundary is increasingly porous as digitization has enabled more workers in core public sector fields, notably education and health, to work virtually at least on a partial basis, and this agility can be harnessed as an asset going forward. It is also the case that many frontline responders, namely police officers, fire fighters, ambulance attendants, and regulatory inspectors (as just a few examples) have administrative functions that have even a partial office dimension.

For these sorts of functions and personnel, added flexibility and workspace innovation could improve working conditions and performance capacities (while also providing safeguards during times of heightened Covid exposures as well as other disruptive events, extreme weather for example). Hybrid strategies can also create the potential for more crossover between frontline professions and those professions traditionally wedded to office work, lessening what has often been a binary and imposed choice for many in terms of path or the other.

Two years into the pandemic, this report demonstrates growing interest and support amongst public servants for the notion of a hybrid workforce. It is also evident from many recent surveys undertaken during Covid that those workers with higher education levels and/or specialty skills – already the most mobile professionally, are proportionally those most likely to be seeking greater flexibility and work-life balance.

As government's dependence on digital technologies grows (and as newer innovations expand: A.I., blockchain, virtual reality, and the metaverse to name but a few), there is a particularly acute need for governments to compete at least reasonably well with industry for specialized skills and talent (while also collaborating in an eco-system likely to feature hybrid work patterns amongst consultants and commercial partners). In other words, government's digital future is closely intertwined with a hybrid workforce (and it bears reiteration that to date, governments have been more trepid than private industry in signalling an openness to viewing hybrid as a strategic opportunity). This caution will invariably become a recruitment and retention liability in the digital realm especially.

Yet it would be a mistake to view hybrid arrangements as a perk for the technologically elite. Much more widely, hybrid models can expand opportunities for those that have been marginalized away from traditional career advancement and professional development trajectories. By allowing for and actively seeking more voices and more varied forms of participation through both in-person and virtual means, a hybrid-based workforce can become more diversified and inclusive – most especially at senior managerial ranks, a longstanding though unrealized goal of the public service.

This deepening of diversity and inclusion depends upon meaningful employee engagement. As well as learning from the ongoing pandemic experience, it is essential to involve and empower workers and managers in developing and adapting hybrid models that align individual expectations and responsibilities with collaborate and integrative outcomes. Within a leadership framework embracing hybrid principles as a basis for innovation, moreover, a differentiated set of hybrid models amongst departments and agencies should be both expected and encouraged (the second appendix provides some practical guidance for organizational capacity-building). Creating these capacities reflects an important nexus between societal adaptation to Covid and the next phase of the public sector's digital evolution.

*In sum, for governments, the opportunity and arguably the imperative for 2022 is less about seeking to orchestrate a return to physical office settings as Covid permits, and more about charting a bold new course – one embracing hybrid as a new strategic paradigm for workspace redesign and more adaptive workforce development.*

*Covid-19 has triggered a massive acceleration of digitization across society, a seismic shift that will never be reversed. Many elements of hybrid have been slowly emerging prior to the pandemic. The time is now to align and deepen these elements within an overarching vision of hybrid innovation and governance renewal.*

## *APPENDIX ONE: LOCAL GOVERNMENT & FEDERALISM*

The primary focus of this report is the Government of Canada, and to a lesser degree, provincial governments. As is too often the case with many aspects of public sector governance reform, overshadowed by this focus are municipal governments – embedded both legal and operationally within their provincial and territorial domains.

Despite being overshadowed, much about public sector reform – including many aspects of new public management, public value management, and democratic and digital experimentations, emerges in a bottom-up manner, with local governments playing a key role as incubators of news ideas and innovations (KPMG 2021). Smaller and more agile, there are degrees of flexibility and adaptation that are more naturally feasible locally than is the case within larger provincial and federal governments.

Covid response and recovery efforts must reconcile these countervailing forces in a manner that reflects varying local circumstances. As the OECD states:' COVID-19's differentiated impact requires a degree of flexibility to allow for territorial responses that are place based and adapted to the most pressing needs and the preparedness of specific localities' (OECD 2020). According to this same report, 90% of subnational government survey reported that 'coordination in the design and implementation of measures among all levels of government is very important, and 79% cite additional financial resources for subnational entities is very important' (ibid.).

In the realms of digital and open government, as discussed in this report, there has been longstanding tension between opportunities for seeking more centralized coordination and shared governance mechanisms, and devolved autonomy and experimentation. These same tensions exist within large governments (for example, Shared Services Canada, Service Canada, Canadian Digital Service and Open Government initiatives federally), much as they exist across government levels as well (Roy 2013/2020; Francoli 2015). Despite some important pilot initiatives and informal collaboration amongst government levels facilitated by the Joint Councils (the Public Sector Service Delivery and CIO Councils), in Canada there is no overarching digital governance architecture for the public sector in its entirety.

In recent years, municipal governments have struggled to keep up with the significant financial and human resources invested into digital strategies by provincial and federal governments. For smaller and remote communities especially, limited resources constrain infrastructure upgrades and the creation of new digital capacities. As well, local governments are particularly exposed to widening security risks stemming from antiquated technology systems (though as witnessed by Newfoundland and Labrador's recent cyber security struggles, these sorts of risks exist at all government levels).

The inter-relationship between federalism and hybrid workspace opportunities is complex, and perhaps especially so for local governments given the potentially widened risks of being overshadowed. If larger governments begin to recruit and deploy workers virtually from a wider geographic canvas, the skills and resource challenges of local governments (and smaller provinces) may well become more acute. The likelihood of some degree of fiscal austerity federally and provincially – as interest rates rise and government confront the significantly expanded public debt and deficit levels accumulated due to Covid, will only accentuate concerns in the years ahead.

What can be done? At a basic level municipal governments can seek to leverage hybrid opportunities for their own benefit. Many rural and remote communities, for example, offer compelling quality of life advantages that may well augment in attractiveness due to Covid-related concerns within congested urban dwellings. As with all government levels, providing hybrid opportunities for workers (who may relocate to a particular region, but still live a good distance from a specific municipal building) is an essential step to remain a competitive employer.

At the same time, these advantages may well prove insufficient if hybrid arrangements were to expand provincially and federally (admittedly an unknown for reasons discussed in this report), as these larger employers provide a richer basket of lateral and promotion opportunities as careers evolve). Municipal governments need to act more creatively and in concert with one another to forge hybrid solutions across jurisdictional boundaries. In limited cases, shared service initiatives exist already but they can be extended by benefiting from shared staff and resources who can potentially work with multiple governments simultaneously.

Provincial governments can and should also play an important enabling role – in providing incentives and mechanisms to facilitate more formalized collaboration. Each Province, for example, could create a specialized agency devoted to digital innovation at the municipal level. One potential model is the *Scottish Digital Office for Local Government* created to 'exchange best practice, develop wider public sector strategic direction and develop new shared services and capacities. The office aims to be a centre of excellence in data, technology and digital, working with the councils to help them with their own transformation and ensuring they are creating top class digital services for citizens.'[8]

A hybrid and shared workforce – along with hybrid workspaces, can expand the feasibility of these sorts of initiatives. From a regional perspective, in Atlantic Canada for example, federal and provincial governments could seek to partner in creating a regional body with shared governance and program responsibilities for a group of provinces and their respective municipal communities. National bodies including the Joint Councils, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, the Municipal Information

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[8] Source: https://www.digitaloffice.scot/about/mission-3

Systems Association, and the Council of the Federation should also be invited to provide input into the formation and deployment of any new initiatives that must be locally grounded and responsive to municipal needs.

While any precise design of this sort of shared governance mechanism is beyond the scope of this report, the same three design principles presented as critical to facilitating hybrid solutions for any single government, would also apply here. Rather than a standardized national program and directives, provincial and regional *differentiation* should be encouraged.

*Engagement* with local governments is essential, and diversity and inclusion considerations are once again paramount – and a particularly important set of opportunities and risks for local governments that up to present day have been limited by geography in terms of their workforce composition (and risk being further exposed by hybrid offerings from other governments as well as the private sector).

As with hybrid solutions for any single government, the contours of political leadership matter in shaping (or stymying) concerted efforts across boundaries. Covid has further exposed the absence of a national framework for health data management, for example, with renewed calls for governments to work together to address these deficiencies.[9] The absence of digital coherence for the public sector is longstanding and it remains to be seen as to whether Covid incentivizes closer collaboration across jurisdictions or reinforces existing boundaries and barriers. Whether and how Provinces incentivize inter-municipal collaboration is also key.

In the absence of a federated governance architecture with shared municipal solutions as its focus and mission, hybrid arrangements are more likely to emerge in a piecemeal and mainly competitive way within the public sector as a whole – to the detriment of an already fiscally stretched and digitally languishing set of local governments.

*Hybrid opportunities should be recognized and pursued as a basis for strengthening and empowering local governments as they play a frontline role in Covid recovery and climate change mitigation efforts.*

*At the same time, a truly national and federated framework for the design of hybrid solutions that can facilitate meaningful collaboration and shared investments and innovation across jurisdictional boundaries is an important dimension of holistic public sector adaptation – with particularly important ramifications for local governments as well as smaller Provinces.*

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[9] Source: https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/corporate/mandate/about-agency/external-advisory-bodies/list/pan-canadian-health-data-strategy-reports-summaries.html

## *APPENDIX TWO - PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR CRAFTING HYBRID STRATEGIES*

As cited in this report, one useful source of practical guidance for developing hybrid strategies stems from the UK's Flexible Working Taskforce established in 2018 by then-Prime Minister Theresa May. The Taskforce was established to:

- Clarify the benefits of flexible working.
- Investigate the barriers that prevent employers from offering, and individuals taking up flexible working options.
- Develop evidence and understanding of the most effective ways to increase provision and support.
- Increase the number of flexible working opportunities available by drawing together action plans and recommendations.

In 2021, the Taskforce was renewed with Covid-19 in mind and two additional objectives were added:

- Understanding and supporting the change to 'hybrid' and other ways of working which are emerging because of the pandemic.
- Longer term, understanding whether there is more to be done to promote 'ad hoc' or 'non-contractual' flexible working.

As one initiative spawned by this Taskforce, a report was commissioned on behalf of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). Consistent with many aspects of the three design principles sketched out above (differentiation, engagement, an inclusion), the report provides an excellent basis for organizations in all sectors to frame hybrid conversations and engagement efforts within the workforce – and to develop hybrid models and action plans. The report further advises organizations to experiment, learn and adapt.

As a summary of more detailed recommendations and guidance, four broad directions are provided:

- *'Providing training to people managers on how to manage hybrid teams effectively and support hybrid workers. Such training should include performance management, remote communication, collaboration and relationship building, as well as the other topics discussed in this guidance.*

- *Reviewing HR processes and procedures across the whole employment lifecycle to ensure they support hybrid working in practice, whilst also enabling inclusion and wellbeing.*

- *Undertaking ongoing listening activity with workers, managers and worker representatives, such as trade unions or work councils, to understand the early lessons of hybrid, paying particular attention to whether hybrid working is delivering the anticipated benefits to individuals and the organisation.*

- *Keeping any hybrid working policies and principles under ongoing review, developing them as necessary. This should include the impact on workers with protected characteristics, and ensuring that action is taken to address any negative or unintended outcomes of hybrid work.'*

Along with the utility of the practical guidance provided for specific organizations, the report and this wider initiative also underscore the importance of political leadership as a basis for not only the pursuit of hybrid models within governments but also collectively across all sectors.

This sort of high level and visible leadership – coupled with multi-stakeholder awareness and dialogue can underpin wider societal adaptation in a post-Covid and more digitized world where larger segments of the workforce are likely to gravitate either by choice or necessity to more flexible and distributed workspaces and more fluid work schedules.

The full report is available online.[10]

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[10] Source: https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/hybrid-working-practical-guidance-2021_tcm18-103709.pdf

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