



POLICY PAPER:

RETURNING TO THE WORKPLACE

September 2023

SUMMARY

The City of Ottawa has announced that as of September all municipal professionals will be required to work from a city facility for a minimum of two days per week, and one of those two days will be a “team” day requiring all members of the same work unit to be in the office on the same day.

CIPP believes that there is a better alternative, one that will result in greater productivity from and a better work/life balance for affected employees. CIPP believes that hybrid and remote work represent the new norm of work for professionals following the COVID-19 pandemic. It will be critical to recruitment and retention. CIPP believes that presence in the workplace should be purposeful. The employers’ current position on mandatory days for in-office work is arbitrary and unjustified.

CIPP holds the position that alternative work arrangements, including hybrid work, should be individually assessed, subject to legitimate operational requirements, and allow for up to fivedays per week to work from home. Mandatory in-office work should reflect evidence and operational requirements that this is the best way to achieve the work outcomes expected of municipal professionals. Health and safety of our members should be a top consideration and measures for in-office work should be put in place. City management and staff should receive the briefing and training which supports this approach and city facilities need to be arranged and equipped in such a way to facilitate ease and productivity when work occurs there.

BACKGROUND

The city of Ottawa has had an [Alternative Work Arrangements Policy](#)¹ since 2003 which currently allows for hybrid and mobile work arrangements as well as compressed work weeks, flexible hours, job sharing and reduced work weeks. The stated purpose of the policy is “... to enable work-life balance for City employees while maintaining a commitment to cost effectiveness, excellence in service delivery and an equitable work environment.” Arrangements under this policy are voluntary and made at the request of individual employees in agreement with their managers. They are constrained by the requirements that they “must align with the City’s business/operational goals and shall not result in additional costs to the City or

¹ Amended July 11, 2023.

compromise service delivery”.² Arrangements are made for a period of 12 months and can be renewed.

CIPP’s collective agreement with the City of Ottawa requires consultation on changes to the Alternative Work Arrangement Policy. It also prohibits the employer from acting in an arbitrary or discriminatory fashion in approving or cancelling alternative work arrangements.

In March 2020 the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a world-wide pandemic and workplaces were closed a day or two later. Everyone who wasn’t required to do hands-on work to keep city residents healthy and safe was sent home to work. There was no time to make new policy or negotiate new collective agreement language or individual alternate work agreements. Everyone at the municipality turned their focus entirely to maintaining and initiating life-sustaining services. Many City employees learned to do their jobs remotely. Others were assigned to other necessary services, some working remotely and some in person.

In 2022 the City asked managers to develop individual Hybrid Work Arrangements with CIPP members, many of whom had already been working from home for more than two years. Those agreements are coming to an end in 2023 and the City is mandating that all employees who are approved for hybrid work arrangements will be required to work at a city site a minimum of two days per week. The days working on-site must include one “standard team day”, with the other day being flexible.

MANDATORY ATTENDANCE IN THE OFFICE

CIPP takes the position that the employer has failed to demonstrate an acceptable rationale for the decision to impose a “one size fits all” rule – requiring work at a city facility for a minimum of 2 days per week – on a diverse range of professionals working in an equally large variety of roles. The employer has not demonstrated this policy will improve service excellence, ensure health and safety, be more cost effective or enhance equality and has failed to consider the impact of their decision on a member’s work/life balance. The evidence collected by CIPP demonstrates that the employer’s policy decision will negatively and significantly impact our member’s productivity and work/life balance. The employer’s decision is not evidence based. The employer has provided no evidence of any substantive issues or concerns with the current policy, or to support their claim that this policy change will improve collaboration. Nor has the employer demonstrated why the prior, more flexible policy could not remain in place.

PRODUCTIVITY

Studies from before and after COVID demonstrate that employees both perceive themselves to be and are more productive in hybrid work environments, especially when work in the office is performed on an “as needed” basis rather than arbitrarily scheduled. In a recent article Gleb Tsipursky, an academic expert and consultant in hybrid work, summarizes some of the academic studies and takes an unequivocal stand. “[D]espite the overwhelming evidence that flexible hybrid work is more productive than forced in-office work for the same

² Alternate work arrangements necessitated as accommodations are covered by separate policy.

roles, top executives are stubbornly herding employees back to the office like lost sheep, expecting productivity to miraculously improve.”³

Some of the evidence is pre-COVID. A 2015 study in China by Stanford business professors reported in the Oxford Quarterly Journal of Economics:

“A rising share of employees now regularly engage in working from home, but there are concerns this can lead to ‘shirking from home’. We report the results of a WFH experiment at Ctrip, a 16,000-employee, NASDAQ-listed Chinese travel agency. Call center employees who volunteered to WFH were randomly assigned either to work from home or in the office for nine months. Home working led to a 13% performance increase, of which 9% was from working more minutes per shift (fewer breaks and sick days) and 4% from more calls per minute (attributed to a quieter and more convenient working environment). Home workers also reported improved work satisfaction, and their attrition rate halved, but their promotion rate conditional on performance fell. Due to the success of the experiment, Ctrip rolled out the option to WFH to the whole firm and allowed the experimental employees to reselect between the home and office. Interestingly, over half of them switched, which led to the gains from WFH almost doubling to 22%. This highlights the benefits of learning and selection effects when adopting modern management practices like WFH.”⁴

More evidence of increased productivity is emerging. A team from the U.S. National Bureau of Economic Research using aggregated meeting and email meta-data from 3,143,270 users in 16 large metropolitan areas in North America, Europe and the Middle East found:

“[C]ompared to pre-pandemic levels, increases in the number of meetings per person (+12.9 percent) and the number of attendees per meeting (+13.5 percent), but decreases in the average length of meetings (-20.1 percent). Collectively, the net effect is that people spent less time in meetings per day (-11.5 percent) in the post-lockdown period. We also find significant and durable increases in length of the average workday (+8.2 percent, or +48.5 minutes), along with short-term increases in email activity.”⁵

A variety of studies during and since COVID demonstrate productivity increases in the range of 6% or 7%⁶ attributable both to increased ability to focus on tasks in home offices and increased length of work days, time formerly spent commuting.

³ Gleb Tsipursky, “Workers Are Less Productive Working Remotely (At Least That’s What Their Bosses Think)”, Forbes (November 3 2022).

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/glebtsipursky/2022/11/03/workers-are-less-productive-working-remotely-at-least-thats-what-their-bosses-think/?sh=2804484d286a>

⁴ Nicholas A. Bloom, James Liang, John Roberts, Zhichun Jenny Ying. “Does Working from Home Work? Evidence from a Chinese Experiment.” The Quarterly Journal of Economics (February 2015 Vol. 130 Issue 1 Pages 165–218). <https://academic.oup.com/qje/article-abstract/130/1/165/2337855?redirectedFrom=fulltext&login=false>

⁵ Evan DeFilippis, Stephen Michael Impink, Madison Singell, Jeffrey T. Polzer, and Raffaella Sadun. “Collaborating During Coronavirus: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Nature of Work”. NBER Working Paper No. 27612 (July 2020). https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w27612/w27612.pdf

⁶ Gleb Tsipursky, op cit.

The Global Survey of Working Arrangement, a multi-university multi-year research project, documented changes in work from home across 15 countries throughout the pandemic. They found that employees save, on average, 72 minutes per day by not commuting. In general, employees allocate 40 percent of their time savings to their jobs, 34 percent to recreation and about 11 percent to caregiving activities. People living with children allocate more of their time savings to caregiving.⁷ The average Canadian commuter saves more than one hour (65 minutes) in commute time each day they work from home. They devote about 40 percent of the time savings to their jobs. The rest goes to leisure, caregiving activities, and household chores.⁸

In a survey conducted by CIPP in July 2023, members were asked to tell us about working from home. More than 40% mentioned increased productivity. Asked what their concerns were about the City's new mandated return to the office, more than 25% reported they thought it would decrease their productivity.

Factors CIPP members identified which improve their productivity while working from home are:

- Fewer people distractions and interruptions
- Less noise distractions
- Better ergonomics
- Breaks aligned with the work
- Some of the time saved commuting is going into extra work time
- Less stress.

Stanford professor Nicholas Bloom, with the Work From Home Research Team, says employees almost doubled the productivity gain between the first year of WFH in COVID and this year because both employees and employers got better at it.⁹

Research consistently shows that employees report higher productivity working from home and having the ability to control their own hybrid schedule to match task requirements. On the other hand, many managers maintain the belief that even knowledge workers are more productive when under their watchful eyes in the office.

CIPP members have consistently delivered high-quality services to our community throughout the pandemic and will continue to do so. The City of Ottawa has offered no evidence that mandatory two days per week in the office will improve the quality or increase the quantity of work provided by CIPP members.

⁷ Cevat Giray Aksoy, Jose Maria Barrero, Nicholas Bloom, Steven J. Davis, Mathias Dolls, and Pablo Zarate. "Time Savings When Working from Home". NBER Working Paper No. 30866 (January 2023). <https://www.nber.org/papers/w30866>

⁸ Cevat Giray Aksoy, Jose Maria Barrero, Nicholas Bloom, Steven J. Davis, Mathias Dolls, and Pablo Zarate, "How Remote-Working Canadians Use Commute Time Savings", C.D. Howe Institute (Feb 1 2023). <https://www.cdhowe.org/intelligence-memos/aksoy-barrero-bloom-davis-dolls-zarate-how-remote-working-canadians-use-commute>

⁹ Rani Molla, "Tell your boss: Working from home is making you more productive" Vox (May 30 2022).

<https://www.vox.com/recode/23129752/work-from-home-productivity>

CIPP members are very concerned that the City facilities available for in-office work are not properly set up and will waste their time.

WORK/LIFE BALANCE

The stated purpose of the City of Ottawa's Alternative Work Arrangements is to "enable work-life balance for City employees while maintaining a commitment to cost effectiveness, excellence in service delivery and an equitable work environment". Both the CIPP members' survey and the literature demonstrate that working from home greatly benefits work life balance for most people, largely because of the time and energy gained by not commuting.¹⁰

Between 2020 and 2023 people have had time to adjust their work situations, become comfortable with the technology, and basic community services like schools and health care supports have reopened. Many respondents to the CIPP survey commented on how comfortable they have become working on Microsoft Teams and how effective they find it.

Asked about their experience working from home, or having a hybrid work arrangement, almost half of the respondents to the CIPP survey reported an increase in their work-life balance related to their family. As noted in international studies, it is the time saved from commuting that makes the biggest difference. CIPP members who work from home have more time in the morning with their families and can be there for children getting off the school bus at the end of the school day. They can get a few small chores out of the way during their breaks and have time to make a good meal at the end of the day. They reported using the time to exercise, to volunteer, for elder care and to take their kids to after-school activities. Commuting is stressful and reducing that stress increases their energy for work and for home.

In recent decades, but before technology made it possible to be in touch with remote co-workers all day and hold meetings on-line, academic studies of working from home often examined whether conflict would be created between work and home responsibilities. Not one member of CIPP reported that kind of conflict in our survey on working from home.

While CIPP members' primary concern about returning to the office is a loss of productivity, the stories they shared of their experiences of working from home focused on work/life balance and using the time gained by not commuting for family, exercise, better eating, volunteering and more.

CIPP members mentioned several other ways in which working from home improved their lives. They saved money because they didn't have to pay for transit fares or for a car, gas, insurance, maintenance and parking. They saved money on coffee and lunch outside the house. They saved money on professional attire. They were able to reduce expenses for childcare, elder care and pet care by working from home – not by doing those tasks during work time, but by being available for them rather than commuting. They contributed to reductions in GHGs generated by transportation and thus helped the City reach its targets to mitigate climate change.

¹⁰ Askoy, Barrero, Bloom, Davis, Dolls & Sarate. Op cit.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

COVID-19 is a level three human pathogen and biohazard that continues to pose serious, and sometimes fatal, short, medium, and long-term health consequences. As an employer, the City of Ottawa has a statutory responsibility to support safe work practices to minimize the risk of occupational injury and illness.

CIPP members who have been able to work from home appreciated that protection from the COVID-19 pandemic for themselves and their families. Many remain concerned about contracting COVID and/or other illnesses in the office and feel safer working remotely. The City has not demonstrated that it has taken adequate measures to protect employees from current and future COVID waves at City work sites.

CIPP members identified several ways in which working from home is healthier than working from the office. Some are mentioned under work/life balance, such as eating better and having time to exercise. Spending less time commuting reduces stress and allows greater rest, both of which contribute to better mental health.

Some members shared that they find it easier to manage mental health issues such as anxiety when working from home rather than in the office.

Over the past three years, CIPP members have created ergonomically correct workstations at home. A majority of members will now be expected to work in the new hoteling spaces created by the employer at the four key administrative City of Ottawa work sites. Through the survey conducted by CIPP, our members reported that ergonomic workstations are not consistently available at these sites and quality control is lacking for the equipment that is provided.

CIPP members reported that having control over their work environment is a significant benefit to working from home. In addition to set-ups that are efficient and comfortable, they mention having workspaces that are healthier and more comfortable when they can have direct sunlight and control the temperature and airflow.

Employees with temporary or chronic health issues which entail mobility restrictions or periodic flare ups, but which don't require formal accommodation, find it easier to handle those at home. It's easier to put a sore leg up on a footstool or meditate for a few minutes to control anxiety or do exercises for a pulled shoulder at your desk in the privacy of your home than in the office.

The number of sick days taken is reduced for those who work through a mild illness at home, rather than staying home to protect others from the virus. Employees report catching fewer viruses.

The City of Ottawa has an obligation to provide a safe and healthy workplace. CIPP is concerned that the City of Ottawa has not demonstrated what measures would be taken to ensure the health and safety of their employees when they return to the office. COVID-19 continues to pose a serious threat to human health, and it is still prevalent in the community.

EQUITY AND INCLUSIVITY

Equity and inclusivity were raised by some CIPP members in their answers to our survey questions. Some specifically mentioned being able to avoid harassment and micro-aggressions

and being concerned about facing them again on their return to city work sites. Others find that working from home is a more productive accommodation for their health issues which, with the help of technology, allows them to be better integrated and make better contributions to their work. CIPP does not advocate separating equity deserving city employees from the rest of the work force to avoid harassment and discrimination, but in the absence of other effective responses from the employer, employees are sometimes well served by working remotely.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Experts point out that employees are consistently more enthusiastic about remote work and hybrid work than their employers and supervisors. There is evidence that employers continue to rely on face-time – how long they see someone in the office - to evaluate employees and that this bias will limit career development for those who spend less time in sight of their managers. A fair and coherent evaluation system for remote and hybrid employees and their supervisors and managers will require some changes in the process and some training for City managers and supervisors.

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Human Resource studies and surveys are unanimous that offering employees flexible hybrid work will be critical to recruitment and retention post-pandemic.

A Business and Development Bank of Canada survey of small and medium size enterprises found that “54% of employees say access to teleworking will be a determining factor in applying for or accepting a new job.”¹¹ Greenhouse, a UK recruitment firm, reports that in 2023 “77% of workers would actively search for or be open to a new job if their company rolled back flexible work policies” and that inflexible companies will struggle to hire top talent – over 40% of candidates will not apply for a role that doesn’t offer their preferred working model.¹²

A report in the Australian Journal of Public Administration points out that remote and hybrid will be especially important in recruiting and retaining employees with caregiving responsibility, particularly women. “Almost a third of respondents to a 2021 McKinsey survey indicated they were likely to leave their organisation if required to move back on-site, with 52% of employees preferring a flexible working model ... There was a strong preference for remote work from those with caring responsibilities ... A 2021 survey of 2100 workers found 60% of women and 52% of men will look for a new job if they are not able to continue working remotely, and 69% of men

¹¹ Business Development Bank of Canada. “What's next for remote work? Views of Canadian SMEs and employees”. 2021. <https://www.bdc.ca/en/about/analysis-research/what-next-remote-work-views-canadian-businesses-and-employees#:~:text=Both%20the%20surveyed%20employers%20and,communication%20difficulties%20and%20screen%20fatigue>.

¹² Melissa Suzuno, “UK workers reveal their top priorities in the 2023 Candidate Experience Report,” Greenhouse Recruiting Blog

<https://www.greenhouse.com/blog/2023-candidate-experience-report-uk>

and 80% of women stated that remote work options were key factors in evaluating any new job ...”¹³

Robert Half, another large HR firm, reports that flexibility and the ability to work remotely are decisive in recruitment for parents of young children – Gen Zers – the next generation of knowledge workers. Flexible hybrid work arrangements widen the recruitment pool.

A Society for Human Resources survey in June 2022 found that “48% of respondents will “definitely” seek a full-time remote position for their next job. To get them to stay at a hybrid job with a 30-minute commute, employers would have to give a 10% pay raise, and for a full-time job with the same commute, a 20% pay raise.” It’s a matter of time and money as well as productivity and work/life balance.

Several members of CIPP mentioned in the survey that they would seek other work if required to return to city work sites on a full-time or arbitrary basis.

The change to regular work arrangements is here to stay. A hybrid work arrangement based on getting the job done in the best way rather than arbitrary mandates to appear at the office will be critical to recruitment and retention for the City of Ottawa.

BETTER ALTERNATIVE

The research on work from home or remote work is almost unanimous – a flexible hybrid model is best for productivity, employee satisfaction and engagement. It is critical for recruitment and retention of new knowledge workers and for supporting a diverse workforce.

Implementing a new remote and hybrid work policy is not about employer benevolence. It is about building the best possible public service for the City of Ottawa. It is about developing the ways in which people work together across the organization effectively and efficiently regardless of their location. It is about making it easier for people to work together. It requires a commitment to putting in place the technology, the facilities and the training to make it work.

CIPP is proposing a better alternative to the City’s two-day mandatory attendance at the office. CIPP proposes that alternative work arrangements, including hybrid work, be individually assessed, subject to legitimate operational requirements and allow for up to fivedays per week to work from home, in line with the CIPP Collective Agreement. As well CIPP calls on the City to put in place appropriate health and safety guidelines for in-office work, and for appropriate workspaces and equipment to be proactively planned and provided to municipal professionals for any days working at a city facility.

The City of Ottawa’s policy is not supported by evidence. It fails to respect the overwhelming commitment that municipal professionals have demonstrated over the last three years. The

¹³ Sue Williamson, Alicia Pearce, James Connor, Vindhya Weeratunga, Helen Dickinson, “The future of working from home in the public sector: What does the evidence tell us?”, Australian Journal of Public Administration (17 August 2022). <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12556>

policy would put CIPP members unnecessarily at risk and undermine their ability to maximize their productivity as they deliver services to the residents of Ottawa.

There is a better way forward for our members, for the City and for Ottawa's residents.