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**Capitol View**

**Commentary by J.L. Schmidt**

**Statehouse Correspondent**

**Nebraska Press Association**

**No More Work from Home? Is Hybrid the Answer?**

Remember the Christmas bonus? Probably a thing of past given the changed face of the workplace. Perhaps your "bonus" allows you to work from home.

Be grateful the next time you slide in behind your computer, in your jammies at some odd hour to complete a project. It seems that even the work from home mentality is changing in favor of the hybrid work week – two or three days in the office and two or three days working remotely.

The latest figures from the University of Nebraska at Omaha’s Center for Public Affairs Research (CPAR), revealed only about 8% of Nebraska workers remained in remote operations in the first two months of 2021; a significant drop from a high of 16% in May 2020. Those figures are thought to still apply to 2023.

Driven by the Covid 19 panic, and necessity, it seemed like remote work was the answer. But workers are obviously heading back to the office. I’m not crazy about that – I remember many a nonproductive workday as office gossip and politics ruled. But the numbers don’t lie.

Since I retired from my third encore career nine years ago, I haven’t given much thought to work, let alone where I do what work I accomplish.

But I sympathize with the State of Nebraska employees who are bristling at a draconian order from Governor Jim Pillen that the entire state work force return to the office full time starting in January. No data, no rationale, he just thinks people do better face-to-face and that people shouldn’t work from home.

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I support their union’s efforts to open bargaining on this change in policy. It should be spelled out specifically in a new labor contract that considers what is for some a drastic change in lifestyle. Remember, some of the state agencies have remote work policies that are decades old, yes, older than Covid.

The Nebraska Association of Public Employees initially sent Pillen's chief negotiator a demand to bargain over the return-to-office mandate, but the state dismissed that demand. The union is emphatic the order — which will broadly end remote and hybrid work for more than 2,800 state employees — will bring "wholesale changes to both the status quo and the terms and conditions of employment" and are therefore subject to mandatory bargaining.

It has been reported that nearly 1,400 respondents to a survey said they were considering leaving state government over the order, including 593 state employees who said they have already started looking for or have already applied for new jobs. More than 87% of state employees who said they are considering leaving the state's public workforce said they would stay if Pillen rescinded the order.

"This will hurt us all, especially the most vulnerable Nebraskans who rely on critical state services," said union president Justin Hubly.

Pillen says only that he does not believe in working from home.

But the national mood is changing, and the results of polls being reported by the media suggest hybrid work may be the preferred model among remote employees.

As for companies, a main driver for transitioning to a fully remote or hybrid workforce was confidence in their employees’ performance when working remotely. Productivity results have apparently improved and given credence to the remote work model.

One media outlet said that in 2019, 73 percent of people working from home said the flexibility of working remotely had positively impacted their personal wellbeing and improved their ability to balance work with leisure and community activities. In addition, more than 70 percent reported seeing improvement in their mental health.

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But corporate America is framing all this as a potential loss of culture. They call it training, growth, brand loyalty and professional development. So much for feeling rogue and trying to do the best you can from home.

While mandates can work, preserving the morale of employees is more important. The office experience will have to change to bring it close to the comfort of working from home.

There is simply no going back to five days a week in the office. That horse has left the barn.

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*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for more than 20 years*.