COVID-19, digitization and hybrid workspaces: A critical inflection point for public sector governance and workforce development

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INTRODUCTION

Whereas the physical office setting has long been the bedrock of public sector operations, COVID-19 starkly disrupted this enduring reality with an unprecedented reliance on remote work arrangements through parts of 2020 and 2021. As Ruth Porat of Google observed, bringing workers back to the office would prove a good deal more complex than sending them home. This caution is reflected in numerous professional and Statistics Canada surveys (further summarized below) that reveal 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, it lies in the absence of uniformity of what workers desire going forward as well as what individuals and organizations deem as optimal (Duxbury in Evans, 2022; Roy, 2022).

Looking ahead, the essence of a hybrid organization and workforce goes beyond binary choices between working in a physical office or working remotely. Ideally, and in contrast to both remote work prior to COVID-19 and predominantly virtual teams during COVID-19, hybrid models enable the seamless alignment of both in-person and virtual settings within innovative and flexible workspaces designed to strengthen both individual and collective performance capacities. In reality, governments are struggling to devise optimal hybrid mixes, accentuating workforce challenges that were apparent prior to the pandemic (Clarke, 2019; Cukier, 2019; Roy, 2013).

In canvassing federal and provincial government pronouncements throughout 2021 and early 2022, there does seem to be widening agreement on the need for flexibility and adaption going forward, with the Government of Canada, for example, committed to developing hybrid frameworks and models in manners expected to deviate across departments and agencies. One CBC News investigation profiled the varying and still-nascent hybrid responses of federal entities (Kupfer, 2022). In 2021, the Bank of Canada announced a permanent hybrid model for its staff—while in the private sector, Ottawa-based Shopify has declared an end to the era of...
office-centricity. Canadian banks have also announced varying plans to embrace hybrid strategies, with both financial services and technology two important industries in terms of the public sector’s competition for managerial talent.

Within this evolving context, the purpose of this brief article is threefold: first, to present some emerging pandemic trends in terms of attitudes and expectations of Canadian public servants; second, to propose three key design principles for leveraging the hybrid opportunity as a basis for governance innovation and strengthened workforce development; and third, to put forth some guidance for how the relevance, utility, deployment, and impacts of these principles can be better examined and assessed by scholars and students of public administration.

WHAT PUBLIC SERVANTS THINK

In broad terms, most Canadian workers are seeking and expecting a mixture of returning to an office setting and working from home. Carleton University’s Linda Duxbury has sought to synthesize findings from remote work surveys of over 26,000 Canadian employees during the pandemic. As of early 2022, she has found that: roughly one-quarter of all workers who were in an office prior to COVID-19 are keen to return full-time; one-quarter would remain full-time at home if given that option; and roughly one-half prefer some mixture of both settings (Evans, 2022). In delving more specifically into the Canadian public sector, my preliminary research draws from (virtual) classroom interactions with roughly 100 mid-career public servants from across Canada, as well as exploratory interviews with ten senior managers at the Deputy or Assistant Deputy Minister level (Roy, 2022).

Anxiety about health and safety

While support for hybrid models can and often does reflect a desire for at least a partial return to the office, there is also trepidation for some about doing so safely. Although it is possible to optimistically anticipate that many of these concerns will gradually dissipate, what will surely be more lasting and pervasive are the impacts on individual and interactive behaviours. Most public servants anticipate permanent changes to in-person workplace routines and patterns of conduct, while only a small minority are without any degree of discomfort at the prospect of returning to an office workplace.

An important challenge facing governments here lies in the fact that many recent workplace innovations prior to COVID-19 had sought to facilitate and even incentivize more open and less structured human interactions: collaborative workspaces, innovation labs, building foyer meeting spaces had all become more commonplace. As health and safety considerations are now viewed as paramount, one important new reality (and an important avenue for future research) for in-person workplaces is the tension between protocols and safeguards to limit the spreading of COVID-19 infections, versus the benefits of in-person venues and gatherings that may be viewed very differently after two years of pandemic living (during which at least some of the in-person collaboration and interactive dynamics has been replicated online, albeit with varying impacts and outcomes that have yet to be fully understood).
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. One Canadian workforce survey 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).

In a similar vein, scholarly research by Choudhury on remote work arrangements during COVID-19 found that middle managers from all sectors are those most stressed by the hybrid and remote experiences during COVID-19 (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. A related workforce survey from the UK found that line manager support for remote working arrangements being the most critical determinant of employee comfort with flexibility while the absence of this support was the most significant factor inhibiting comfort with flexible arrangements (Taylor et al., 2021).

One Deputy Minister interviewee felt that while they were generally quite satisfied with the ability of individuals to complete their specified tasks while working from home, there was concern about the loss of informality and more serendipitous forms of collaboration that can happen within the office and through social interactions stemming from a common locational starting point (Roy, 2022). 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, governments have had very limited knowledge and experience with the deployment of virtual work platforms and hybrid strategies prior to COVID-19.

At minimum, then, this person felt that it would seem overly simplistic and counter-productive to characterize virtual platforms and interactions as categorically inferior to in-person settings and interactions given the absence of the latter prior to the pandemic. A critical avenue for future research, and a central dimension of digital government’s evolution will be seeking to understand how largely virtual public sector organizations performed during the pandemic, and how such lessons are shaping subsequent hybrid mixes of virtual and in-person environments.

Pre-pandemic studies of remote working arrangements can usefully shed light on past experiences and impacts (De Vries et al., 2019; Roy, 2013). Similarly, emerging empirical research examining remote work experiences during the pandemic can also provide fresh insights into one important dimension of current and future hybrid models (Yang et al., 2021). But the relevance of these studies is also constrained by the limited scope of remote work prior to COVID-19’s unprecedented imposition of virtualization. Accordingly, it is one thing to study a minority of the workforce viewed as being party to special arrangements outside of the norm, and quite another to assess experiences during the pandemic-induced shift to predominantly virtual across large segments of the public sector.

Traditional top-down ethos

One clear source of anxiety for many public servants stems from a perceived deficiency of meaningful input over what comes next. Despite the imposed continuance of flexibility in the near term due to Omicron, 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 (Clarke, 2019; Roy, 2013). 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 accepting hybrid as a necessary but mainly transitory phase, rather than a strategic inflection point (Roy, 2022). Whether this reflex is evolving due to recent hybrid pronouncements by governments is a research avenue of great importance, one fundamental to shaping the future of digital government initiatives often stymied to significant degrees by many facets of traditional governance structures and culture (Clarke, 2019, 2021; Clarke et al., 2017; Roy, 2013, 2020).

DESIGN PRINCIPLES AND RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

With respect to the governance and policies of hybrid workspace strategies, three design principles offer useful guidance: differentiation, engagement, and inclusion (Roy, 2022). On the one hand, these principles denote three broad conceptual directions for exploring and crafting hybrid strategies—as informed by preliminary evidence gathered to date as well as wider and inter-related research on digital government reforms in recent years. On the other hand, these principles also represent avenues for future research based upon more specific investigations and critical inquiry to test their broad validity and explore various sub-themes reflected by each one. The remainder of this article will focus primarily on this latter realm.

As a principle, the notion of differentiation is partly grounded in underlying digital government scholarly discussions about the contours of centralized coordination and planning versus decentralized flexibility for varying organizational units (Clarke, 2019; Clarke et al., 2017; Roy, 2020). In underscoring the importance of differentiation, Gratton makes the case that managers must consider and address four distinct elements of worker and managerial experiences and perspectives that vary considerably across organizational and functional facets of the public sector: jobs and tasks, employee preferences; project workflows; and inclusion and fairness (Gratton, 2021).

We return separately and in greater detail to inclusion below, but the other elements noted by Gratton provide a basis of future empirical investigations by scholars about whether and how hybrid arrangements are shaping both individual and collective experiences, actions, and outcomes. Much of this work must be qualitative: while the various consultancy and government’s own workforce surveys can legitimately be critiqued and dissected on methodological grounds, the breadth and consistency of these surveys provide a platform for some basic trends and starting points.

Labour relations and the evolving roles and views of public service unions are also important for shaping the relative embracement of differentiation as a principle: while labor organizations have generally conveyed support for hybrid flexibility, there may well be demands for greater clarity and commonality for their memberships as a whole in terms of hybrid models and policies, potentially a constraint around differentiation. As Duxbury implies in characterizing government’s laggardness relative to private companies in terms of hybrid experimentation and deployments, there is also a basis for comparative investigations of hybrid models across public and private sectors—specifically in non-unionized environments, and whether more or less differentiation occurs and the extent to which labour organizations are a factor in such contrasts.
For understanding employee engagement, the utility of qualitative studies should once again not be underestimated. At a broad level, it remains important to track and establish the contours of government initiatives for employee engagement, and to seek to ascertain whether existing professional surveys reveal growing or lessening levels of employee engagement and trust. While peer-reviewed scholarly surveys can be useful here—particularly in providing an evolving baseline and measurable benchmarks over time, the equally essential role for qualitative investigation is to seek to identify and determine the strength of linkages between engagement processes, organizational trust, and performance.

On the relationship between hybrid and inclusion, we can postulate three ways in which the deployment of hybrid workspace models can potentially widen and deepen inclusion: first, by expanding the geographic scope of recruitment; second, by creating more flexible and diverse career progressions for traditionally and historically marginalized employees by lessening the behavioural vices and biases engrained in both formalized structures and informal expectations intertwined with in-person presenteeism; and third, by facilitating new forms of interactions and community-building at least partly through virtual means that can lessen barriers through broadened awareness and acceptance of diversity.

Yet whether any such expansion and deepening of inclusion happens depends upon many factors, including the underlying importance of physical proximity in historically marginalizing many from career advancement opportunities and leadership positions. Two important research questions arise: first, to what degree are workforce inequalities intertwined with physical proximity and the time and locational confines of office presenteeism; and second, is the gradual and uneven emergence of hybrid models one that widens or narrows inclusion?

To investigate and devise informed responses to such broad questions, data collection is crucial and more specified themes must be developed. Samuel and Robertson suggest five critical elements of data gathering for understanding and gauging the inter-relationships between hybrid work arrangements and inclusion: i) who’s spending more time at the office and who’s spending more time at home; ii) who gets to choose when to be at the office; iii) how does time in the office shape the path to promotion; iv) how are remote management tactics used; and v) how does time in or out of the office predict employee engagement and retention (Samuel & Robertson, 2021)?

Along with such quantitative data metrics, more qualitative case studies of departmental and agency experiences can enable a richer appreciation of individualized experiences and perceptions, and whether or not the managerial traditionalism of the public sector is being lessened or reinforced by hybrid arrangements. It also bears underlining just how much room for improvement remains in the public sector with respect to diversity and inclusion. Across the Government of Canada’s senior managerial echelon (the Executive or “EX” cadre of roughly 6200 managers), roughly 11.5% of positions in 2020 were held by all visible minorities combined, without one ethnic minority alone reaching the 3% threshold of the 11.5% total (Treasury Board of Canada, 2020). Similarly, a 2021 CBC News investigation found that across Metro Vancouver, nearly 80% of all senior government managers and elected officials are Caucasian (McElroy, 2020).

Whether hybrid models lead to improvements or constraints in pursuing the sorts of diversity and inclusion aims that governments themselves have championed is thus a key dimension of human resource management and workforce development going forward. One important aspect of hybrid work arrangements in need of greater attention (for policy and governance reforms and scholarly research) is the growing inter-relatedness of human resource policy systems, training and development frameworks, and digital governance strategies, a
dynamic already apparent prior to COVID-19 but also tremendously reinforced by the pandemic (Cukier, 2019; Roy, 2022; Roy et al., 2022). Comparative studies across the public, private, and non-profit sectors may also prove revealing in terms of understanding this dimension’s evolution—and whether hybrid arrangements ultimately shape the inclusivity aspects of recruitment and retention for governments if and as hybrid offerings expand in other sectors.

With COVID-19 seemingly destined to become an endemic and enduring reality, governments seem to be balancing a desire to signal a return to normalcy (in suggesting and in some cases even encouraging a return to offices) with a cautious acceptance and exploration of hybrid workspace models within their own ranks. There is a significant risk of a lost opportunity if this tenuous balance is tilted by an underlying reflex of traditionalism and presenteeism that seeks to revive physical office settings as the nucleus of workplace governance. For scholars and practitioners alike, seeking a better understanding of the emerging scope of hybrid acceptance and experimentation is an essential task in shaping the future of public sector governance in a post-pandemic and increasingly digital environment.

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