

# How remote work poses unique challenges to public sector employees

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Public service employees don't necessarily benefit from remote work. Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

[The dispute last year](#) between the federal [Treasury Board and the Public Service Alliance of Canada over remote work arrangements](#) raised a lot

of questions about a one-size-fits-all approach. Those questions need answering.

Working remotely seemingly offers clear benefits to public sector employees and government organizations alike by raising productivity, speeding up connectivity and improving [work-life balance](#).

Remote work can also improve motivation, performance and [job satisfaction](#) by giving workers [more autonomy](#) in how they go about their jobs. But there are also concerns that the benefits may dwindle over time due to the changes it causes in relationships between employees and organizations and workplace motivation. Potential downsides and costs must be weighed against any benefits.

A question that was likely absent from last year's contract negotiations—if only because the empirical evidence is sparse and inconclusive—is how [remote work](#) will affect [public service motivation](#), a particular drive that leads many people to jobs and careers in government or other public sector organizations like hospitals and universities.

Evidence shows that motivation in the workplace [is influenced by the extent of interpersonal interactions](#), especially with those who benefit from the services employees are providing. So what happens when remote work arrangements start to erode those instrumental relationships that help sustain the public service motivation that drives public servants to work each day?

## **What (little) we know**

There are many potential benefits of remote work, though the empirical evidence is still a bit sparse. A recently published [literature review](#) found that remote work may improve job satisfaction, lower absenteeism and

reduce on-the-job distractions.

But these benefits largely depend on how remote work is designed—in other words, the mix of key job features and resources like [time pressure](#), autonomy, dispute resolution mechanisms, supervisor support and feedback. Workers who have strong social support, and those who were more emotionally stable and felt more autonomous to begin with, have generally experienced the most benefits from remote work.

However, remote work was also found to increase stress and reduce engagement in some circumstances. The reduction or even complete absence of interpersonal connections and in-person encounters have been linked to stronger feelings of [social isolation and loneliness](#). What's more, the gain in job satisfaction tended to dissipate and level off as the amount of time working remotely increased beyond a certain threshold number of weekly hours.

The limited research on remote work specifically in the public sector has uncovered some potential downsides. One study published just before the COVID-19 pandemic used daily reports from [civil servants](#) to analyze how remote work affected work engagement. The authors found [no evidence](#) that remote work fostered greater engagement.

On the contrary, their results suggest that civil servants who worked from home felt a stronger sense of being isolated from colleagues and had weaker organizational commitment—though a high-quality supervisor–subordinate relationship tended to ease these adverse effects.

This feeling of isolation may have serious unintended consequences. One could be the sapping of that unique public service motivation that leads people to careers in government and jobs that partly depend on the proximity of workplace relationships, especially with the beneficiaries of one's work.

## Potential impact on public service motivation

Much of the discussion surrounding remote work has ignored the potential impacts on employee motivation in general, and the unique motivation that draws people to public service specifically.

Though growing, the body of research on how remote work may impact employee motivation is still small and inconclusive overall. But overlooking the impacts of remote work on motivation may have unexpected consequences for Canadian public services and policies.

As noted, the social isolation of remote work may jeopardize public service motivation by undermining what's known as [relational architecture](#)—job features that shape employee opportunities to connect and interact with other people—of federal public service jobs.

We [know that](#) personalizing and humanizing jobs by establishing contact with those who benefit from them can have positive motivational effects. Similar motivational benefits have been found for assisting colleagues within organizations.

Conversely, a lack of regular meaningful contact with beneficiaries and co-workers due to remote work may erode motivation in the public service, particularly for front-line employees who regularly interact with people who benefit from their work.

There is ample evidence that public sector employees value the social aspects of their jobs and working on behalf of other people or society. Indeed, public service motivation is what draws many people to careers in public service in the first place.

How can we ensure that the foundations of relational architecture don't erode so that interpersonal contacts—including with beneficiaries—can

still entice prosocial and civic-minded Canadians to join the federal public service?

## Proceeding cautiously

Technological and organizational changes that enabled remote work have led to a major shift in how, where and when Canadian [public servants](#) do their jobs. This major shift in work spaces will certainly continue [well into the future](#).

For now, the effects of shifting to remote work on employee productivity, organizational morale, service quality and other employment outcomes have yet to be unequivocally determined. At a time when Canadian taxpayers are increasingly cynical about government performance, it's imperative that the Public Service Alliance of Canada and the Treasury Board consider the effects of remote work on employee motivation, especially the type of public service motives that lead people to careers in government.

One of the least discussed issues between the federal Treasury Board and the Public Service Alliance of Canada is motivation among [Canadian public servants](#). We have very little understanding about the potential motivational effects of remote work, in particular the potential erosion of public service motivation due to fewer meaningful interpersonal interactions, especially with the beneficiaries of public services.

With all the unknowns, it's wise to proceed cautiously. Human resources scholars and practitioners are still discovering how, when and for whom the benefits of remote work in the public sector outweigh the costs.

Federal Treasury Board officials and their union counterparts must consider how to fortify the relational architecture of public service jobs and take steps to safeguard employee [motivation](#) before finalizing any

agreement on the future of remote work in the federal government.

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