

# Global Best Practice

## | MANAGING A REMOTE WORKFORCE

This practice is directed to managers and supervisors in public procurement. While serving multiple stakeholders and end users, public procurement professionals often do so while working from remote locations. Procurement leaders must ensure an entity's operational needs are met while effectively managing:

- Buyers
- Procurement Specialists
- Contract Administrators
- Procure to Pay (P2P) Analysts

### Standard

Procurement duties need to be performed at a professional level and in accordance with acceptable industry standards. These standards must be adhered to regardless of where the procurement professional performs them. Best practices in procurement management can be achieved while supervising procurement professionals in remote and hybrid environments. While these standards have developed in recent years due to the changing work environment, they can be considered as guidance to procurement managers across the world.

**Managing a remote workforce:** Serving as a supervisor for employees that perform procurement related duties from home or a location outside of the physical procurement office. Included is work performed in a hybrid model, where procurement activities occur in both the home and office.

### Introduction

This global best practice will provide guidance to public procurement leaders on effectively managing a remote workforce. Like other business sectors, public procurement has faced changes and challenges in recent years as more employees are performing their work at home or in remote offices.

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### Background

As public procurement professionals have struggled to gain acceptance and credibility in recent decades, they have done so in a traditional office environment. Whether in a city hall as part of local government, or the central administrative offices of a major university, procurement has operated just as their peers have: in-person. Working remotely, often referred to as telework or telecommuting, was done on a very limited basis.

These in-person operational functions in procurement included:

- Reporting to an assigned office location.
- Working a fixed schedule (i.e., 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM)
- Participating in procurement staff meetings.
- Providing procurement training to departmental end-users.
- Meeting with current and prospective suppliers.
- Attending operational meetings of assigned departments.
- Administering contracts.
- Conducting bid, RFP, and other solicitation openings.
- Presenting procurement related reports and recommendations to elected bodies.

Beginning in 2020, the global workforce was disrupted by the COVID 19 pandemic. Offices and businesses around the world were shut down to prevent the spread of the virus. In the US, federal, state, and local procurement offices were asked to operate without coming into the office. This forced the hand of public procurement to perform their duties with creativity and flexibility.

### Current State

Agencies across the world, including thousands of NIGP members, have adopted alternative work schedules in recent years. These changes, initially driven by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) recommendations and state and local regulations during the pandemic, have now become standard practice. As a result, work schedules for public procurement professionals have evolved to include various styles, such as:

- Fully remote work schedules from home offices.
- Limited remote work schedules that included face masks and social distancing.
- Hybrid work schedules including a combination of remote and in-person work.

### Technology Impacts

Seen by some as the silver lining of the pandemic, technology implementation has increased in all business sectors, including public procurement. The profession saw a huge increase in the use of an existing technology, video conferencing. Without the ability to meet in-person, various platforms were used to conduct the business of procurement. Some of the most common systems include:

- Zoom
- Microsoft Teams
- Skype
- Google Meet

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Even those that were new to video conferencing quickly become adept at using them. Team meetings of all sizes are being conducted online, and often in-person office meetings included a video conferencing option. Current hybrid schedules may have colleagues on the same procurement team with varied in-person schedules. While such an arrangement would have been rare in the past, today it is commonplace.

Virtual meeting practices that have proven to be effective include the following:

- Starting meetings on time
- Requesting all participants enable cameras to promote engagement.
- Muting meeting attendees (unless speaking) to reduce background noise.
- Using system features such as raised hand and user chat to prompt dialogue.
- Sharing screen of presenter to share key information (agenda, financial data, graphs, etc.).
- Offering input opportunities for “reserved” staff members.
- Closing meeting professionally and timely.

As an example, a standard procurement meeting for the City of Tucson, Arizona includes buyers that attend in-person as well as virtually.

The following is a hybrid schedule adopted by the City of Tucson that continues to work quite effectively:

#### **CITY OF TUCSON ADMINISTRATIVE DIRECTIVE 2-01-19 - TELECOMMUTING:**

Allows the employee to telecommute (a.k.a. work from home) on any basis ranging from incidental (ex - having to be home for the plumber) to long term. Per the directive, a long-term telecommuting situation would need to be approved by the employee’s supervisor and must be reviewed annually. Under this situation, the employee would be able to telecommute up to three days a week. The number of days is currently at the discretion of individual departments (i.e. - some departments may only allow one or two days) but this may change to a consistent City-wide approach as the telecommuting policy is reviewed in the future.

Another key area for technology adoption is digital procurement systems. While electronic bid submission has been around for many years, the onset of the pandemic forced many public agencies to implement these systems quicker than originally planned.

In a testament to the resiliency of public procurement, agencies around the world put digital procurement systems in place that allowed for the submission of electronic bids and proposals. Solicitations were posted on these systems in digital format, rather than in printed form, which made the entire procurement process essentially paperless. These procurement systems increased sustainability while reducing printing costs for both public agencies and their suppliers.

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An agency with a history of procurement excellence, Orange County, Florida implemented a digital procurement system in 2021. Their paper-based practices of solicitation distribution and receipt of bids was quickly shifted to a digital environment. All bid, RFP and other solicitations were posted online, offers were accepted through a procurement portal, and public bid openings (as required by Florida Law) were conducted through the use of video conferencing.

## Management Practices

Although managing a remote workforce has created a new challenge for public procurement leaders, many have risen to the challenge and established some best practices. Included are long standing management principles that can be utilized in managing a remote staff (often with modification).

These include the following:

- Ensuring employees have sufficient computer equipment to work remotely (laptop, monitor, docking station, printer, etc.).
- Providing access that meets data security requirements (VPN, dual factor authentication, etc.).
- Allowing employees input into their work schedules (days, hours, in-office, etc.).
- Ensure expectations are made clear to employees, including use of written agreements for remote work.
- Holding regular meetings with procurement team members.
- Reaching out to employees individually as needed (in-person and virtually).
- Using performance metrics to gauge employee performance, regardless of where work is performed.
- Treating all employees fairly and equitably (including hybrid work schedules).
- Considering stipends for employees that use personal cell phones for agency work.
- Considering stipends for employees to have sufficiently fast internet at their remote location (service upgrade for their home internet?) The City of Tucson's Administrative Directive specifically mentions a minimum speed of 50Mbps at the employee's remote workstation.

## Benefits and Challenges

There are many benefits of allowing employees to perform some of their work remotely.

These include the following:

- Limiting personal contact and the spread of viruses.
- Opportunity to focus on procurement tasks without office interruptions.
- Meetings can be scheduled without allowing for travel time.
- Provides an improved work-life balance for staff.
- Reduces commute time and vehicle emissions.
- Can allow for better utilization of office space (i.e., shared workstations).



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Conversely, there are certain challenges with managing a remote workforce.

These may include the following:

- Lack of personal interaction with peers.
- Less ability to hold impromptu office meetings.
- Reduced interaction with agency customers and suppliers.
- Potential distractions due to home events.
- Over-reliance on technology to perform basic tasks.
- Some experience feelings of isolation and loneliness.

## Future of the Procurement Workforce

It is difficult to predict what the typical procurement office may look like in the future. The events of 2020 brought about circumstances that nobody could have foreseen, which required procurement leaders to rapidly adapt and adjust their workplace policies. Similar to other industries, including high tech, public procurement shifted to remote work during the pandemic, and then brought employees back into the office when it was safe to do so.

While many agencies have returned to traditional work schedules, it is reasonable to assume that remote work will continue to be an option for tomorrow's procurement professionals. Hybrid schedules exist for many public entities that allow for procurement work to be performed remotely, at least to some extent. Some practices that procurement leaders should keep in mind when managing a remote workforce:

- Clearly convey policies and expectations to all employees.
- Ensure agency policies regarding telework are adhered to.
- Periodically review work policies to ensure their relevance and effectiveness.
- Involve impacted employees in policy discussions and changes.
- Evaluate available and advancing technologies that support remote work.
- Determine how evolving Internet technology impacts remote work (copper vs. fiber optic lines, wireless connections, hot spots, 5G, video conferencing software, etc.).
- Stay abreast of leading industry practices and trends regarding telework.

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