Prioritizing digital readiness in a remote environment

5 insights from local public sector leaders

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Introduction

In two December 2024 roundtable discussions, hosted in Sacramento and San Francisco, leaders from state and local governments convened to share insights on pressing issues facing their organizations. The diverse group included chief information officers (CIOs), a city manager, a city council member, a transit leader, and more, each bringing a unique perspective on topics such as digital equity, hybrid work policies, cybersecurity, and community engagement. This dynamic conversation highlighted the challenges and opportunities these leaders encounter in navigating technological, social, and economic changes. Below are the Top 5 Takeaways from this insightful exchange, offering a snapshot of the innovative strategies and forward-thinking approaches shaping the future of local governance.

1. Equity challenges in remote work implementation

One of the central themes of the discussions was the urgent need to close the digital divide and ensure equitable broadband access for all residents. Participants in Sacramento highlighted the disproportionate impact of connectivity gaps on underserved and rural communities, emphasizing the importance of digital inclusion for education, economic development, and civic engagement. Leaders discussed leveraging public-private partnerships, such as collaborations with telecom providers, and maximizing federal funding opportunities to expand broadband infrastructure. The shared vision for 2025 includes universal internet access and comprehensive digital literacy programs to empower residents and foster inclusive growth in their communities.

In San Francisco, participants also discussed equity challenges in remote work implementation, as disparities are often based on job functions and access to resources. Participants highlighted that frontline workers, such as custodians, maintenance staff, and public safety employees, are often required to remain on-site, while administrative staff enjoy more flexible remote options. Another participant emphasized the importance of ensuring that employees working remotely have equitable

access to technology, stating that they provided laptops and conducted ergonomic assessments to level the playing field. Addressing these disparities is essential to fostering fairness and morale within the workforce.

2. Hybrid work models offer flexibility, improve retention

The adoption of hybrid work policies has become a practical solution for many state and local government organizations, balancing flexibility with operational needs. Participants shared a variety of approaches, ranging from fully remote roles to structured hybrid schedules. Recruitment and retention needs are also driving these policy adjustments. Leaders discussed the difficulty of recruiting employees in high-cost areas, such as the Bay Area, and how remote work options can expand the talent pool. One participant shared that "about 70% of our employees don't live in the city due to high housing costs," highlighting the importance of flexibility in attracting non-local candidates. Others emphasized the growing demand for remote work among prospective hires, with one leader noting, "70% of our workforce indicated they would quit if required to return to the

office full-time." These trends underscore the need for policies that balance organizational goals with employee preferences to ensure a sustainable and satisfied workforce.

3. Cybersecurity awareness and digital literacy

As remote work becomes a permanent feature in many organizations, enhancing digital literacy and strengthening cybersecurity measures are critical priorities. With cyber threats like phishing, ransomware, and espionage attacks on the rise, participants stressed the critical need for robust cybersecurity measures. One participant noted, "It's amazing—we think these sophisticated things are happening, but it's really human errors like clicking the wrong link that leave us vulnerable." To combat these risks, organizations are investing in proactive measures such as upgraded IT infrastructure, auto-deletion of noncompliant apps on work devices, and employee training. Regular "hackathons" to test security awareness and real-time threat analysis are among the strategies being employed to safeguard sensitive data and maintain operational integrity. One leader in the San Francisco discussion shared how they conduct

regular phishing tests and require employees to score at least 95% on cybersecurity assessments, stating, "If they fail, they must undergo additional training."

4. Community impacts of remote work

Participants underscored the significance of government employees being physically present in their communities to foster relationships, enhance services, and support local economies. One participant from Alameda County, highlighted the ripple effects of employee presence: "We believe strongly that we have to be there and spend money locally; during the pandemic, everything shut down, and our favorite places went out of business."

A San Francisco leader observed, "If we don't find a way to get people in the office at least three days a week, downtowns are dying," reflecting concerns about the economic vitality of urban hubs. Another participant emphasized that remote work is contributing to "the highest commercial real estate vacancy in the country," highlighting the urgent need for strategies to revitalize these spaces. Balancing the benefits of remote work with the economic needs of communities remains a critical challenge for public sector leaders.

5. Emerging technologies and AI

The discussion highlighted both the promise and challenges of integrating emerging technologies like generative AI into government operations. These tools offer opportunities for greater efficiency, innovation, and service delivery. However, they also raise significant concerns, particularly regarding data security, ethical use, and maintaining authenticity in official communications. Participants emphasized the importance of establishing clear policies and guidelines to regulate AI use, along with robust cybersecurity measures to protect sensitive data from potential breaches. As technology continues to evolve, balancing innovation with accountability will be critical for local governments to effectively harness AI while maintaining public trust.

Conclusion

These roundtable discussions among state and local government leaders underscored the complex challenges and opportunities they face in an evolving landscape. From bridging the digital divide and adapting to hybrid work models to addressing cybersecurity threats, fostering community engagement, and responsibly integrating emerging technologies, these leaders demonstrated a shared commitment to innovation and inclusivity. As remote work continues to evolve, collaboration and innovative approaches will be essential for public sector organizations to thrive in this new landscape. The insights shared in these conversations serve as valuable guidance for other leaders grappling with similar challenges, offering a foundation for building resilient and equitable workforce strategies.