

# SHAPE THE *Future*

## Public Service Commission's Guide for Working Remotely



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# Working Remotely

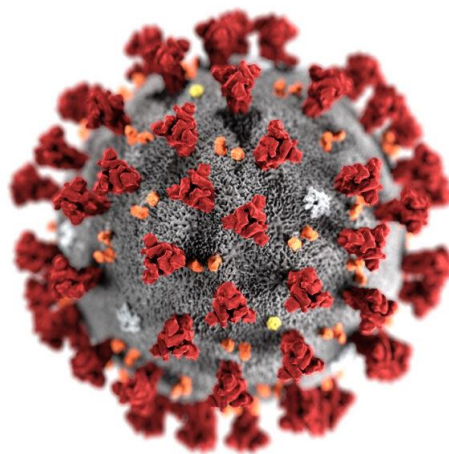
## Background

The history of remote work extends much further back than the pandemic that 2020 brought to Canada (Choudhury, 2020), in fact, the Public Service Commission has had remote work (previously called telework) and flexible work policies since February 2013. More recently, organizations have been mounting interest in flex work in order to increase productivity and engagement, and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

In October 2019, the Climate Change Secretariat (CCS) commissioned a study (Dunsky Energy Consulting, 2019) that suggested significant green house gas (GHG) reduction potential from greater uptake of flexible work arrangements (FWA) and/or remote work arrangements. The CCS undertook a cursory jurisdictional scan of FWA/ remote work policies across Canada to identify possible opportunities and challenges for increasing uptake within the Government of Prince Edward Island (GPEI) workforce. Findings of the scan were presented to CCS in November 2019, noting that data gathering was needed to understand the current baseline of GPEI employees. It was recommended that the Deputy Ministers Council (DMC) strike a working group comprised of Information Technology Shared Services (ITSS), Public Service Commission (PSC), Transportation and Infrastructure (TI), and others, as the decision-making authority for changes and uptake lies outside the purview of the CCS.

## The COVID-19 Pandemic

On March 12, 2020 CCS briefed the new Minister of Environment, Water, and Climate Change on the need to create this working group (noted above), and on March 16, 2020 the global pandemic forced a Public Health State of Emergency and all GPEI non-essential employees were instructed to de-populate buildings and work remotely (from home). Many employees returned to the workplace in June 2020, and some on a rotational basis – embracing working remotely at least part time as we are still in the midst of the pandemic. It is anticipated that by the late fall of 2021, there will be more formal arrangements in place for those who want to work remotely full or part time.



## The Future of Work – Remote Work and Flexibility

The Public Service is stable and reliable, yet flexible and creative. We promote innovation and diversity in the workplace where employees make valuable contributions and are proud and inspired to shape the future of our Island community. Since the pandemic began, GPEI has committed to increasing the number of employees working remotely and we are supporting flexibility wherever possible to ensure our employees are bringing the best possible service to the people of Prince Edward Island. The topic of remote work (within and beyond PEI) is top of mind for both private and public sectors alike; garnering attention not only in provincial and territorial jurisdictions, (Fraser, May 14, 2020; Yarr, June 24, 2020), but also at a federal level (Meader, November 24, 2020; Tasker, November 26, 2020).

Globally, workplaces are making the shift to a work-from-anywhere future for knowledge workers permanent in many cases (Choudhury, 2020; Johnson & Suskewicz, 2020) as the coronavirus pandemic has fundamentally changed the way organizations operate (Neeley, 2020). A great number of employees, managers and teams have embraced the opportunity to work remotely and have been successful in achieving their business objectives and client service expectations. GPEI saw many innovations as a result of the shift to remote work, providing services to Islanders in ways they had never before.

As we move into the COVID-19 recovery phase and [move forward in 2021](#), we continue to be faced with Public Health restrictions, personal accommodations, and heightened Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) requirements. Depending on your team's current arrangements, you may be interested in flexible work arrangement (FWA) for a few different reasons. Regardless of the reasons, the same management principles still apply. No matter where your employees are working, if you provide clear expectations, set realistic outcomes (or measures for success), and the proper tools to get the work done, you and your team can still be productive and collaborative. HOW you deliver on these responsibilities may need to change<sup>1</sup>. PSC has made the commitment to flexibility beyond the pandemic, and in an effort to support this, has created this guide to provide consistency for you as you explore whether part-time or full-time work is right for you and your position, or your employees.



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<sup>1</sup> Nova Scotia Public Service Commission, 2020

## Guiding Principles for Remote Work<sup>2</sup>

There is **no one-size fits all approach** to who can remote work or not. Some positions will not be eligible to remote work due to the nature of the role (e.g. front line services). Flexible working arrangements (including remote work) will be tailored to each person and position they hold within the organization.

Remote work will be considered when it's **mutually beneficial**. Every effort will be made to be flexible and adaptable where it's economically and operationally feasible to do so, while ensuring that government operations and client service needs are always maintained.

If there is one thing public servants have demonstrated they are good at, it is being **nimble and agile**. We have seen changes in Public Health measures on a continuum over the last 18 months that have allowed us to adjust based on changes in operational duties, programs, initiatives, re-deployments/positions, of government.

The Public Service Commission has committed to being **equitable and inclusive** and recognized that remote work and flexibility is part of how we (GPEI) do business. FWA creates conditions that will support the diverse and changing needs of employees, and in turn supports the organization's goal to constantly strive for [diversity and inclusion](#) within the public service. Government of PEI is committed to encourage ways to adapt and mitigate the impacts of climate change; and remote work is an opportunity or a practice that has the potential to reduce carbon emissions; it's **good for the environment**.

## Manager Key Activities

- Review positions in your division/section that may be eligible for remote work with your HR Manager and your senior leadership team
- Consider options and restrictions, based on employees' desired arrangements and what is feasible and viable for government operations
- Prepare to communicate with your senior leadership and ensure your division/section arrangements are aligned with broader expectations of your unit, division, or department before communicating/ formalizing arrangements with your team
- All equipment such as computers, phones, and peripherals must be government-issued and managed. Specific costs will depend on the equipment requested and should be reviewed with ITSS for costing information.
- Engage remote workers in conversation including how, when, and what information you will communicate, where to store/share information (e.g. shared drives, submit requests for VPN access, access to email, and/or other approved cloud systems, etc.) [Refer to the IT Guidelines for Remote Work](#) (<https://spitssp.gov.pe.ca/SitePages/Standards,-Procedures-and-Guidelines.aspx>). *Please note: To access the IT Guidelines, use your network account and password to connect. If you are working remotely, connect to VPN first to connect securely to the government network.*
- Other key activities for formalizing a remote work arrangement are detailed in the [policy](#)

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Nova Scotia Public Service Commission, 2020

## Employee Key Activities

### I want to work remotely... what do I need to do?

Remote work is voluntary, but the decision to implement a formal arrangement must be supported by the senior leadership of your department or division. At any time, there may be adjustments needed based on department of Chief Public Health Office requirements, government operations and client service expectations, even after initial arrangements are implemented.

If you are interested in a remote work arrangement, here are the steps you need to take to explore whether this option is suitable for yourself and your position:

- Familiarize yourself with the [Remote work Guidelines](#) in the Human Resources Policy and Procedures Manual.
- Speak to your immediate Supervisor/Manager about whether your position is eligible to work remotely and if this is a suitable option for you.
- Ensure you have a suitable remote work space/location identified with the appropriate office equipment (i.e. desk, chair etc...)
- If your Supervisor/Manager agrees that you are eligible to apply for a remote work arrangement, submit the “Application for Remote work Arrangement” in Appendix A of the Remote work Guidelines.
- If your request is approved, work with your Supervisor/Manager to complete the “Remote work Agreement” in Appendix B of the Remote work Guidelines.
- You must coordinate with your Supervisor/Manager for them to complete the inspection of your work site – either by an in-person visit or through photos/video. For more info, contact your HR Manager.
- It is recommended that those on a permanent full or part time remote work arrangement use a government issued cell phone. For more information about requirements for your home internet access, refer to the IT Remote Work Guidelines.
- You must comply with all Records Management regulations and IT standards
- Remote access sessions may be monitored, and periodic audits may be carried out using IT remote systems.
- You must also initial and sign the “Remote work Site Health and Safety Self-Assessment Checklist” in Appendix C of the Remote work Guidelines to accompany the “Remote work Agreement” and sign an Acceptable Use Agreement at the beginning of remote work to ensure you are aware of any changes since you initial signed the document.

- The Supervisor/Manager will ensure you are provided with the appropriate computer equipment and systems access to work productively and efficiently.
- Maintain regular contact and communication with your Supervisor/Manager and team while working remotely.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### 1. What is remote work?

A flexible work arrangement whereby employees have been approved to carry out some or all of their duties from an approved remote work site (i.e. their home or another remote office location).

### 2. Do I need a formal remote work arrangement during the COVID-19 pandemic response?

It is not necessary to have a formal remote work arrangement in place during the pandemic response. Given the state of emergency and recommendations of the Chief Public Health Officer, employees are encouraged to work remotely where possible. These informal arrangements are only approved where it is possible for the employee to work effectively from home and where operational requirements permit. The manager/supervisor has the discretion to approve these informal arrangements.

However, should an employee be interested in pursuing a formalized remote work agreement during the pandemic, they are welcome to submit their remote work application to their manager/supervisor for consideration.

### 3. Who is eligible to remote work in a formal arrangement?

Non-shift work employees are eligible to apply for a remote work arrangement, subject to operational requirements and the suitability of both a) the position and b) the employee to work remotely. The Employer has the discretion to approve remote work arrangements. Management also has the right to end a remote work arrangement should, for example, an employee's performance decline or if the arrangement no longer meets the organization's needs.

### 4. Who is responsible for approving an employee's request to remote work?

An employee would complete and submit the Remote work Application to their immediate supervisor for approval. Pending the approval of the application, the employee and their immediate supervisor would complete the Remote work Agreement and Remote work Site Health and Safety Self-Assessment Checklist and the three documents would be sent for Director and/or HR signature where applicable.

### 5. Can a remote work arrangement be initiated by the Employer?

The employee and their supervisor must be in agreement to the remote work arrangement. It is intended that these arrangements be voluntary and mutually agreed therefore, the Employer intends to respect the wishes of the employee to participate in a remote work arrangement. Vacant positions may be designated as remote work positions and staffed accordingly with the successful candidate agreeing to work remotely by accepting the position.

### 6. Is it acceptable for my manager/supervisor to inspect my remote work site by another means other than a site visit?

Yes, your manager/supervisor may agree to accept photos and/or video of the workspace in order to approve the arrangement.



**7. Can remote work help an employee with child or other dependent care needs?**

Remote work is not a substitute for child or dependent care. However, as an Employer who values flexibility and adaptability for its employees, remote work is a valuable tool to individuals with caregiving responsibilities. Time saved commuting can be spent with family members, and the flexibility of being closer to home may enable caregivers to take less time off for activities like doctor's visits, school programs, etc. A dependent child or elderly relative might also be at home with the remote worker, after school or during the day, as long as they are independently pursuing their own activities.

**8. What equipment will the employee need to work remotely and who will provide it?**

The Employer will provide a government issued cell phone/ smartphone, laptop, required software and approved peripheral equipment (like additional monitors or docking stations). Printing is not supported nor encouraged in home. Providing suitable office furniture is the responsibility of the employee in their home-office workstation.

**9. Will the Employer pay for the cost of supplies used at the home remote work location?**

The employee's manager/supervisor may cover these costs at its discretion. Employees must discuss any potential expenses with their manager/supervisor before they are incurred.

**10. Will the Employer provided office furniture for the home remote work location?**

Providing suitable office furniture (including desk, chair etc.) is the responsibility of the employee. There may be exceptions (i.e. for accommodating a disability or medical condition) which can be discussed with the manager/supervisor.

**11. Will the Employer subsidize costs associated with the remote work site (i.e. electricity, internet etc..).**

The employee is responsible to provide the remote work site solely at their cost. Associated costs (such as internet, electricity, and/or heat) are the responsibility of the employee. If an employee elects to upgrade their internet for improved service, this is at their cost.

**12. Why is it recommended to have \$1,000,000 minimum liability insurance?**

Should the employee have Homeowners or Renters insurance it is recommended that they inform their insurance company of their remote work arrangement. If the employee carries "Personal Liability" insurance we would recommend a minimum of \$1,000,000 coverage. The cost of the insurance is solely the responsibility of the employee. This is to protect them from any potential liabilities while working from home (i.e. potential loss of property or injury to a delivery person).

**13. Am I eligible for mileage costs for trips to the office or other sites?**

Unless the remote work site is designated as the employee's primary worksite (and they have a full time remote work agreement), they are responsible for travel costs associated with getting to and from their designated work site (i.e. their office). For other travel, employees are eligible for travel expenses as outlined in the Treasury Board Policy Manual.

**14. Am I eligible to claim my home remote work site on my income taxes?**

Please refer to the [Form 2200](#) information on the Canada Revenue Agency for eligibility.

**15. Am I required to work if government buildings are closed due to inclement weather?**

If you have the capability to work from a remote location and are in a formal or informal remote work arrangement, you are expected to work from home regardless of whether office buildings are closed.

**16. If I wish to have flexible work arrangements in addition to a remote work arrangement, what do I need to do?**

If you wish to pursue flexible work arrangements (flex time, compressed work weeks, job share, income averaging, deferred salary, leave of absence, etc.) you need to complete an appropriate application *in addition* to the application for a remote work arrangement (found in Appendix B).

## The Opportunities and Challenges of Remote Work

Remote work presents opportunities for employees, teams, departments and organizations as a whole. Recognizing the prospects that flexibility in the workplace can offer is important to promote a public service that is agile and responsive in providing service and meeting the needs of Islanders.

To promote and encourage remote work arrangements, recognize the opportunities for:

➤ **Greater flexibility**

Employees benefit from having the opportunity to balance their personal and work lives through remote work. Ensure all parties are clear on workload expectations through regular, ongoing communication and trust individuals to manage their time and balance their workloads while saving valuable time in their day from commuting. The extra hours earned not travelling to and from work support the health and wellness of employees.

➤ **Promote work-life balance**

Work-life balance can mean different things to different people. Allowing employees to have more time in their personal lives by reducing commuting to and from work supports employees in achieving a better balance – regardless of what that looks like for each person. This will promote healthier relationships, health and overall happiness for individuals, which only helps to make happy, healthier employees.

➤ **Increased productivity and performance**

Remote work offers improved productivity and performance of staff. By removing the distractions of the workplace (i.e. loud environments, co-workers), employees are able to focus their concentration. The flexibility of working remotely allows individuals to take a break on their own terms (i.e. going for a walk, moving to another room) which can stimulate productivity and increase task focus when they return to their work.

➤ **Improved employee satisfaction**

Employees working remotely generally experience greater satisfaction with their work, given the flexibility and balance it brings to their lifestyle. Most employees prefer to have a combination of remote work and office work to ensure they still feel connected to the workplace but at the same time, have the opportunity to break-up their routines and enjoy the flexibility that comes from remote work.

➤ **Empowerment and control**

Through remote work, employees have the opportunity to exercise more control over how they complete their work. They may have the flexibility to adjust their schedule (depending on the nature of their position and work), are able to determine how they want to work (i.e. their work environment) and generally set-up their work to balance their preference with the needs of the organization. Managers must have processes in place for managing workloads and establishing/clarifying expectations of their staff. However, giving employees the discretion on how they carry out their work results in happier and healthier staff.

To recognize the opportunities, it is important to also acknowledge and understand the challenges of remote work to ensure employees are set up for success in these arrangements.

➤ **Disconnection and isolation**

To help combat feeling disconnected and isolated when working remotely, employees tend to prefer working part-time in the office and the remainder of the time remotely. Managers must ensure that if staff are working remotely – whether full or part-time – they are regularly checking in with their employees and maintaining connection. Socialization and regular connection with teams is critical as well as regular standing appointments between managers and their staff. Employees also need to reach out when they need help and managers need to be prompt and responsive to their remote team members (remember, they cannot just walk down the hall to their manager’s office to ask a question); and managers need to reach out to employees, including for on-boarding purposes.

➤ **Impacted work-life balance**

While remote work generally offers improved work-life balance, if not managed correctly, it can tend to have the opposite effect. Working and living in the same space can make it more challenging for employees to step-away from their work to take breaks or follow a regular work schedule that does not result in them working too much. It is important that without the distractions of the regular office workplace, that employees take regularly scheduled breaks and make sure they shut down their workstations at the end of the day to remove themselves from the workplace and allow themselves to unwind and take time for themselves. Managers need to be conscious of this and ensure staff maintain boundaries for themselves to create a positive work-life balance.

➤ **Increased anxiety and stress**

FOMO= Fear of missing out. This can be a challenge for employees working remotely – they are not in the physical presence of team members, management and colleagues, which may increase anxiety and stress about what is happening in the workplace. Maintaining regular communication, creating various communication channels, and creating an inclusive culture for both office and remote workers alike is essential to ensure staff feel connected and that they’re involved in the day-to-day operations, just as they would be in the physical worksite.

## Supporting Remote Employees in a Remote Work Arrangement

There are several resources (updated continually) to support both leaders in the organization with (partially or fully) remote teams as well as employees working from home. Click on the [blue text](#) to see the full articles and websites.

[Promising Practices to Managing and Supporting Your Remote Workers](#) details specific, research-based steps that managers can take without great effort to improve the engagement and productivity of remote employees, even when there is little time to prepare. As much as remote work can be laden with challenges, there are also relatively quick and inexpensive things that managers can do to ease the transition. This article was written in Harvard Business Review (Larson, Vroman, & Makarius, 2020).

[Leadership Best Practices](#) guides the reader to various articles from Harvard Business Review. Questions about remote work, what it takes to run a great virtual meeting and communication are examples of topics included in this synthesis. In addition, [Best Practices for HR and People Leaders](#) provides some advice for managers who have employees working remotely.

[Building Trust for Employee Engagement during COVID-19](#) is about being readily available and helping employees give meaning to a crisis (“sense making”), leaders can build employee resilience and social capital with their people. Moreover, they can help connect employees to the organization and to one another and can help enhance social connection and affiliation—not just formally, but also by allowing informal and organic conversations to emerge.

[Employee Engagement during COVID-19](#) is intended for leaders to support employee engagement through the Covid-19 pandemic. With some of the workforce working remotely, and some back in the office, it remains vital for managers, supervisors and directors to engage with the various working populations they are leading. Included are multiple actionable steps to foster engagement within your department in hopes of improving communication, recognition, echoing the value of individuals' work, building and maintaining trust and importantly, having fun together

In addition, the PSC offers a [variety of virtual professional development](#) opportunities throughout the year (free of charge!) to support employees and managers learning. Of particular importance during the pandemic have been the need to learn about: [Work Life Balance](#); [Productivity, Organizational Skills, and Time Management](#); [Change Management](#); and Employee Health and Well Being ([Stress Reset](#), [Conflict Management](#), and [Mental Health Awareness during COVID-19](#)). PSC has also developed some [guidance for virtual learning](#); available on their website and [OHS](#) has posted resources to support employees as well.

In 2020, there were virtual training sessions for PEI Civil Service employees and managers on “Managing the New Normal” of Remote working. If you would like a copy of the presentation for yourself or your team, please contact your HR Manager.

To register, visit: <https://psc.gpei.ca/pathways-for-learning-course-selection>.

If there is a course that you don't see offered here, but would like to take that will support your learning plan, you can apply to the Development and Training Fund ([Excluded](#) or [Unionized](#)) to see if you are eligible for funding.

## Workplace Mental Health Resources

Adapting to the changes ahead may cause additional anxiety for managers and employees. Mental health tips and resources to help employees look after their mental health during this trying time can be found on the PSC's website in the [Employee Assistance Program page](#) and in the [EAP Handbook](#).

The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is designed to help employees experiencing personal problems, which may affect job performance. EAP helps employees solve problems as early as possible before they seriously affect self, family, and work performance.

### Employee Assistance Program Resources – COVID-19

1. COVID-19 and Anxiety <https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/infosheet/covid-19-and-anxiety>
2. COVID-19 Sanity Guide <https://www.tenpercent.com/coronavirussanityguide>
3. Guided Meditation <https://www.tarabrach.com/guided-meditations/>
4. Stress Relief <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm>
5. Messages from EAP:
  - [Anxious Returning to Work? You Are Not Alone](#)
  - [Coping With Changing Times](#)
  - [Staying with the Present Moment during a Pandemic](#)
  - [Time to Truly Take Care](#)
  - [Video Chat Burnout is Real - Take Care of Yourself](#)

## Government of PEI– Supporting Employees & Supervisors/Managers

Government of PEI conducted a survey in May 2020 to better understand employee's experience working from home due to the public health emergency measures put in place during the pandemic. The responses to these questions were important to help inform the implementation of the Sustainable Transportation Action Plan, Climate Change Action Plan, and to inform the review of policy documents such as the Flexible Work Arrangements Policy and Telework Guidelines of the Public Service Commission. Employees responded positively to working remotely; we adjusted in a timely manner; and showed indications of employee engagement being high. Workplace flexibility will continue to be explored and in addition, in response to the *Working from Home* survey in May 2020, GPEI continues to support employees and managers in several key areas:

### Wellbeing, mental wellness, psychological health and safety

- [EAP bulletins](#)
- EAP moved to Zoom Health to make apps more accessible
- Five virtual sessions on Mental Health during COVID-19 for Employees and Management
- Number of Departments hosted staff day presentations on Mental Health during COVID-19 for all staff

### Technology and tools

- Accelerated the implementation of Video Conferencing Platforms and Collaboration Software
- Tip Tuesdays – regular emails to support employees in the area of IT
- Mobilized technology and system supports and demonstrated agile responses to COVID-19 (employees working from home) in record speed
- Developed/ launched pilot hoteling spaces for employees to work

### Leadership and manager/supervisor communication to employees

- There were several Remote Work Presentations (for managers and employees) delivered (and recorded) in 2020-2021 to support employees and managers delivered by Cox and Palmer.
- Developed the Remote Working Guide
- [Telework Policy](#) was updated
- CEO of PSC emails regularly to entire Civil service to ensure that constant communication
- Telework sessions to support employees
- Mental Health messages regularly communicated along with supports available
- Website resources to support managers managing employees who work remotely
  - [Best Practices for HR and People Team Leaders](#)
  - [Leadership](#) Summaries
  - [Promising Practices to Managing and Supporting Remote Workers](#)
  - [Employee Engagement during COVID-19](#)
  - [Building Trust for Employee Engagement during COVID-19](#)
- Developed [Work and Study Hubs](#) for individuals to access reliable internet
- [Broadband fund](#) developed to improve stable, high-speed Internet infrastructure
- Developed a [Better Together Award for Employee Recognition during COVID-19](#)



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## **Appendix A: Remote Work Policy 5.05**

Remote Work Policy

<https://psc.gpei.ca/sites/psc.gpei.ca/files/5.05%20Remote%20Work%20Guidelines%20Final%20%28002%29WORD%20Oct%2026%202021.pdf>

## Appendix B. Flexible Work Policy 5.04

Flexible Work Policy

<https://psc.gpei.ca/sites/psc.gpei.ca/files/5.04%20Flexiblework%20Arrangements.pdf>

