

Hybrid work models to be examined at Town Hall this fall

The global pandemic has changed the way many of us work and municipal services are no exception.

Potential hybrid work models for Town Staff will come into sharp focus this fall as Town Hall looks into a post-pandemic environment.

Beginning this past March as many public health restrictions were lifted, municipal staff were directed to start coming back into the physical office space to address in-person service needs and to increase face-to-face collaboration with their colleagues, according to a report before Council.

This was the first step in seeing what was going to work moving forward.

By May, a new phase in this assessment had begun, working with staff on fine tuning new and existing work models with an eye at moving towards a hybrid model of work that will allow the organization to maintain some of the benefits of remote work while, at the same time, restoring the benefits of being able to collaborate face-to-face and address in-person citizen [and] customer needs.

The latest phase will begin next month when staff will look at the possibility of compressed work weeks and flexible start and end times for municipal staff.

The Town's workforce has adapted over the past two years to continue to provide a seamless citizen experience while maintaining a healthy and safe workforce, said Demetre Rigakos, Manager of Human Resources for the Town of Aurora. The work model that we implement will consider new technologies and processes that support an efficient and modern workforce model while maintaining the same or higher levels of service. The Town's customer experience plan will enable us to receive regular input on how we are doing in the delivery of services and what adjustments we may need to make to address customer needs.

The digitization of our services over the past few years and more recently during the pandemic has resulted in service efficiencies for our citizens. The introduction of flexible work arrangements will further enhance our ability and availability to respond to our citizens' needs.

Moving forward with hybrid and flexible work models will boost employee retention and attraction, said Rigakos, with a focus on work-life balance and consideration from a psychological and physical health and safety perspective.

Flexible working has emerged as a catalyst for the corporate world throughout the pandemic and will also be a key factor in the 'next normal' as, on average, surveys have shown that employees would want to work between two and three days remotely in a post-COVID-19 world, he continued. One of the emerging issues in our communities is housing affordability and commute times. Providing our employees with flexible work options will address some of these concerns but it also enables the Town to attract and retain talent from a broader geographic area, thus increasing our skilled talent as a competitive advantage.

Any moves in this direction would be done in a fiscally sustainable manner, he added, and that shifts would be planned, thoughtful and gradual.

Workplace culture has been affected by the pandemic as employees have been more isolated, have had to juggle protecting their family members, addressing children and elder care issues while, at the same time, being productive in their roles, he concluded. Staff have demonstrated the ability to adapt throughout the pandemic despite the challenges they faced both at work and at home. Our improved culture of trust has been demonstrated by staff continuing to produce work and provide excellent customer service to our internal and external stakeholders, even when our technological infrastructure did not provide us with the same opportunities it does today to connect and work efficiently in a virtual environment.

?The Future Work Model will require a continuous shift in our mindset to provide an environment that is founded on trust, collaboration, clear outcome expectations, and regular feedback, support and communication.?

The report, which was received by Council in July, outlined that the third phase of this plan, scheduled for the fall, will be done in concert with progress reports to Council where they will approve next steps as they come up.

The fourth phase of the plan will run from January through June of 2023 and serve as an implementation period.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter