Development Services Department

Managing Remote Employees/Building Operations CALBO ABM 2023

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The City of
SAN DIEGO

About DSD

- FY 2023 - $117 million budget, 747 FTE positions.

- 10% overall increase in permit approvals, for a total of about 69,000 approved permits.

- 150,000 inspections of private development projects.

- Division of Building Construction & Safety is the largest of nine divisions.

- Cloud-based permit and review system.

- Performance of virtual inspections.

- Developed backlog in some areas due to workload/staffing mismatch.

- Adding more positions through hiring and contracting.

Current operations

- Staff required to be in the office two days per week.

- Beginning in-person staff meetings.

- In-person public access to records via appointment.

- In-person public access to staff by appointment for setup problems.

- Virtual appointments for a variety of services including project setup.

- Using Acela, Eplanreview, MS Teams and Zoom for meetings, Power BI for data analysis, Cisco Jabber for telecommunications.

- Office sharing and hoteling.

Remote Work

What's the fuss about?

- The pandemic has shown that many jobs can be done remotely.

- The digital transformation, now in its third year, facilitated and made remote work possible.

- Recent hiring experiences show some candidates wanting hybrid remote work, others wanting 100% remote work.

- Members of the public enjoy not having to drive and find parking.

- Employees are happy about remote work.

- Remote work is not new. Telecommute!

Public Agencies
What Makes the Difference?

- Public agencies include physical spaces serving a large and non-homogenous demographic.
- Applicants need more individualized attention due to the digital process.

Remote Work & Economy

Notable statistics

- The average office occupancy in 19 major Cities remains at below 50% for much of CY 2022.

- Nearly 80 Million employees in the US still work from home at least one day a week, saving 200 million hours/6 billion miles by not commuting to work, which is estimated to equate to an 8% pay increase.

- A Stanford study showed the amenity value of remote work worth 6.8% of pay for those earning $150,000 or more and 1.7% for those earning $20 to $50,000.

- **Remote work is not going away.**

What is Remote Work?

Performing work in a location other than the primary work location.

Employer Vision

Employee Vision

Employer vs employee

view of remote work

What is work?

R Administrative, technical reviews, inspections, meetings with applicants, communication with applicants and other co-workers.

O Collaboration, mentorship, training, networking, getting help from others to get things done, interacting directly with the boss.

Remote Work Considerations

Critical elements

- Workers.
- Work performed.
- Where the work is performed.
- How the work is performed.
- Digital codes.
- Network connection.
- Equipment.
- Software.

- **Attitude.**

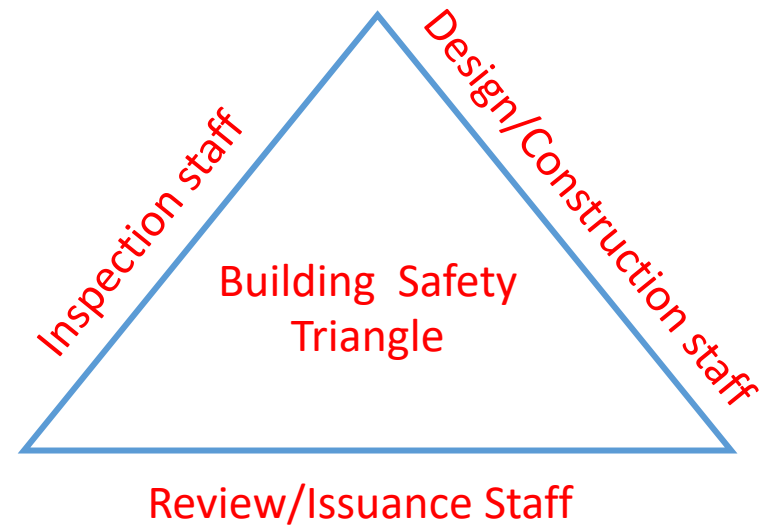**This is why it is complicated**

Remote Work Issues

- Equity issues:

  - Not all tasks are eligible for remote work. Records are an example.

  - Some employees have slow internet connections or no internet access.

  - New hires need to be in the office five days a week until fully trained.

- Was mandatory during pandemic and became optional in 2023.

- IT security required issuance of laptops to most employees for remote work.

Stakeholders

Team includes:

- Building official.
- Permit technicians.
- Plan reviewers.
- Records and other administrative personnel.
- Building inspectors.
- Plan designers, engineers, architects.
- Contractors.
- Owners.
- Constituents.

Inspection staff

Design/Construction staff

Building Safety Triangle

Review/Issuance Staff

Remote Work Benefits

- A benefit that helps with recruitment and retention.

- The convenience benefit of remote work equates to almost 7% of pay.

- Allows employees who have long commutes to save on the commute cost.

- Allows for uninterrupted quiet time.

- Applicants enjoy saving time by partaking in virtual meetings.

Multiple Remote Work Locations

Ensuring safety in the built environment is a team sport, and teams need to report to same pitch and play on the same pitch to the same playbook.
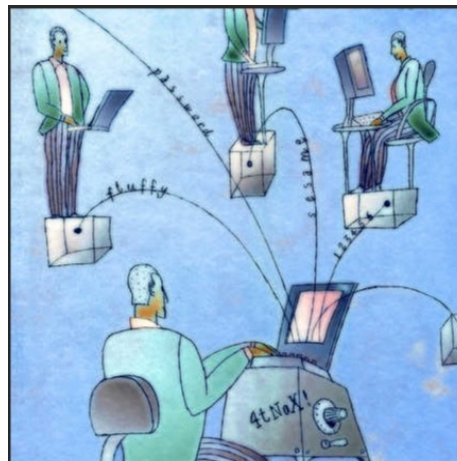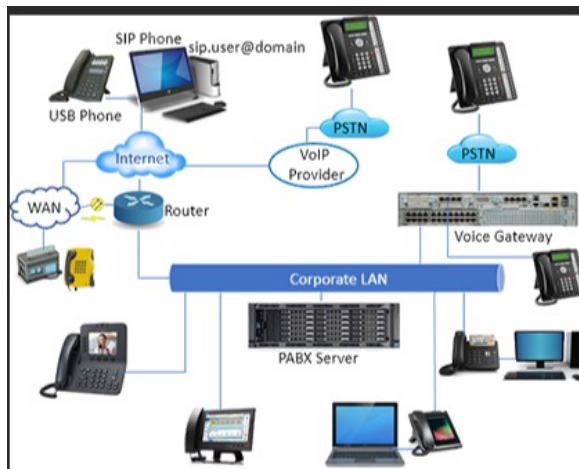
With remote work, there are many playing fields connected digitally through hardware and software to create an even virtual pitch of play.
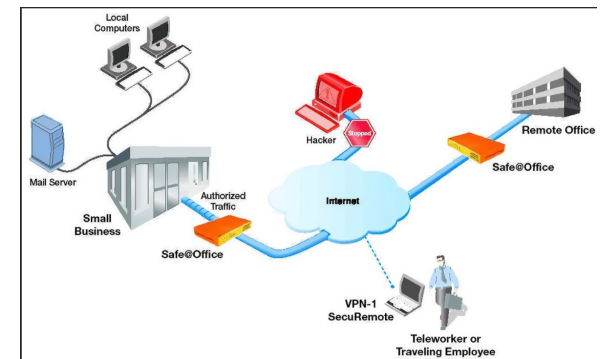
After March 2020

What changed:

- Department operations were no longer centralized.

- Employees worked independently from home.

  - Varying views of what work is.

  - Independent thinking.

  - Lost sight of the big picture.

  - Individualism.

- Supervision suffered.

- Uniformity of work suffered.

- Work got completed.

Downsides of Remote Work:

- Staff still learning to maximize the benefits of software and hardware enabling remote work.

- Workplace culture is suffering.

- Lack of camaraderie.

- New hires onboarded since 2020 don't know other employees.

- Applicants complain of poor communication and unnecessary increase in review cycles.

- More difficult to supervise, mentor and hold staff accountable.

Prior to 2020

After March 2020

What worked well:

- Professionally presented webinars.

- Internal trainings.

- Project meetings previously happening through conference calls became more efficient thanks to video conferencing.

  - If only employees would turn on their cameras.

- Permits were issued, and volume of work increased significantly.

- Voluntary participation in professional association activities increased.

- Commute times eliminated, and employees can work from anywhere.

2023 and on

Challenges ahead:

- Keeping staff engaged.
- Retaining staff.
- Returning to 2019 service levels.
- Increasing responsiveness and showing a sense of urgency.
- Having more direct contact with applicants to allow more empathy, not just through voicemail messages or e-mails returned next week.

Questions?

Snapshot of San Francisco DBI

- 279 employees
- Oversight by Building Inspection Commission
- $90 million budget
- 54,000 permits issued annually
- 137,000 inspections conducted annually

March 2020

"Never let a good crisis go to waste."

- Winston Churchill

Covid-19

Overnight, the pandemic changed our ability to work and interact as we've always done

It raised a new question:

How do we work together when we have to be apart?

Covid-19

Building departments are the linchpin of the real estate and construction industries

We had competing priorities:

- Continue operations – permits, inspections, records, enforcement

- Keep staff safe

- Keep the public safe

- Maintain revenue – SF DBI is an enterprise agency

- Support the City's emergency operations

Crisis Playbook: Leadership

Every crisis is different, but there are key principles to managing in a crisis:

Be the leader – Show up, think strategically, leverage resources, be decisive, give effusive praise to staff going the extra mile

Recognize you will need to change your operations: make sure your executives and middle managers understand and are preparing their teams to adapt

Focus on what matters: providing your key services while protecting your staff and keeping them informed and productive

Have a plan and communicate constantly with your executive team, staff, elected officials, stakeholders and the general public

Keep cool and keep at it – perseverance pays off

Remote Work is a Solution, Not a Problem

When Covid-19 hit, remote work tools were in place, but the workplace culture and policies were not

We had some things going for us:

- Technology – laptops, VPN, tablets, video conferencing, file servers, smart phones

- Existing policies for flexible work schedules

- Inspections, much of plan check and many of our administrative functions can be performed remotely

Remote work is a solution, not a problem

And some pretty big challenges:

- Face-to-face, onsite permitting process

- Union expectations

- Indirect oversight and accountability

- Flexible work schedule policies developed as exceptions, not the rule for all staff

- Jobsite inspections that require human interaction

SF DBI Remote Work Principles

- Keep operations live, even if at a reduced level

- Everyone can work remotely – but some functions require majority in-person interaction

- Provide the tools needed for the work
    - Technology deployment
    - Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) distribution – masks, hand sanitizer, etc
    - Reorganized work spaces and barriers to distance staff/customers

- Acknowledge staff challenges, concerns and worries – take them seriously and try to address them directly

- Enhance accountability to maintain KPIs – focus on your middle managers, they feel change most acutely and need your support

- Recognize the value remote work can add to staff's personal lives

Operationalizing

Our metrics didn't change, but our main goal was keeping the lights on and the industry going

Customer-facing staff (clerks, plan checkers and inspectors) needed more PPE than business staff

Mindful of generous, but temporary workplace policies – easier to give new flexibility and benefits than it is to take it back once people have embraced the changes

Already had most of the technology, we just needed to give people permission to use it; the technology we didn't have, we bought

Operationalizing

Developed new oversight processes for remote work – greater flexibility requires more management. Workplans, additional manager check-ins, overhauled how we assign plan check work

Focused on expanding the types of permits, records and other services we provide that could be issued online to reduce the need for customers to come to the Permit Center

Solicited input from staff on how to facilitate and expand remote work—staff helped come up with policies, such as a sign-out system to take paper plans home, and other ideas

Progress is a Good Thing

SF DBI will not be going back to our old ways:

- Inspectors are using tablets to file reports from the field

- Video conferencing can be a more efficient format for many meetings, including plan rechecks

- More permits available online, greater focus on our website, digital records, electronic plan review

- Electronic timekeeping

Adapting to a New World

Lead the change

Honor your role

Speak truth

Honor staff values

THANK YOU