Reimagining the Government Workplace
Preparing today's workforce for tomorrow's challenges.

Many public and private sector organizations seek to operationalize the often-cited notion that _people are the most important asset._ Employees now change jobs in record numbers, suggesting a re-definition of workforce expectations and a major shift in workplace dynamics. Re-imagining the U.S. government workplace has never been more critical.

Understanding the Future of Work
In the Center's 2018 book _Government For the Future_, Brookings' scholar Darrell West wrote that "in the near team, the increased use of artificial intelligence and data analytics, greater deployment of personal digital assistants, and new employee performance rating systems could enable greater labor productivity and enhanced accountability."

In the longer term, automation will continue to advance and disrupt how work gets done, including productivity increases that support a 30-hour work week. Estimates vary regarding the workforce impact from robots, AI, and automation. OECD found that a focus on "tasks" as opposed to "jobs" would lead to fewer job losses.

These actions will be taken at a time when workplace realities have shifted dramatically due to the pandemic, The 2020 Center report, _Distance Work Arrangements: The Workplace of the Future is Now,_ found that slow adoption of distance work arrangements accelerated when the pandemic hit, when virtually every organization pivoted to a new workplace—home. federal, state, and local governments not only had to transition their workforces to work from home, but also had to change how they delivered services so they could be done remotely, such as using electronic signatures for contracts.

As managers and workers became more adept with the technology and tempo, organizations—both public and private—have become more open to distance work becoming the "new normal." Still, Certain jobs can't be done from home – customer service, intelligence, safety inspections, etc.

Organizations not only invested in distance work technologies such as laptops and greater access to the internet, but they invested in developing new ways to manage in order to ensure continuity in order to get work done. These parallel investments result in new ways to manage— oneself, others, and teams. Distance work has significant benefits for a positive future workplace, including greater flexibility, autonomy, and job satisfaction.

Given the experience since 2020, a spectrum of workplace futures has emerged:
- **Recreating the office online**. This is where most traditional organizations have landed. More effective companies offer access to e-tools, but without any redesign of how work gets done.
- **Adapting to the medium**. These organizations are investing in better equipment (for example, they may provide employees with a cash grant to improve their lighting for video calls). Their work favors text-based communication, with fewer meetings that have clear agendas and include only 'must have' participants.

- **Asynchronous communication**. These organizations are structured more in line with how work gets done than where or when. They are typically global and recognize that presence does not equate to productivity.
- **Nirvana.** These organizations field purely distributed teams that work better than in-person teams. There are a handful of companies like this, and most are in the tech industry.

Research can help government overcome multiple challenges to achieve West's "rosy scenario" -- including isolation, childcare needs, technical inequities, measuring productivity, developing new work routines, working in a blended workplace (government and contractor), and promoting flexibility to move and out of government.

The Center later initiated a Challenge Grant Competition soliciting essays from academics and practitioners describing how government can best transform the way it works, operates, and delivers services to the public in light of the impact of this pandemic. In re-framing government management and operations, this 2021 compendium of essays from the field highlighted several key themes:
- Changing the nature of how government works focuses on government jobs best suited to shift virtually, the new "workday," best practices, government as a model workplace, and workplace health, safety, and privacy.
- Reimagining how government operates and delivers its missions to the public explores ways to improve operational effectiveness by addressing engagement, equity, and culture in government service delivery.
- Managing risk and building resilience focuses on building supply chain resiliency making them immune to unpredictable shocks, emphasizing the critical importance of managing risks and vulnerabilities effectively while also identifying principles that fosters trust in institutions and how they operate in times of crisis.

In 2022, the Center published a new report from scholar David Wyld looking further at the impact of the pandemic on the future of work. Wyld found that almost two years into the pandemic, remote work experience has markedly changed attitudes and expectations about where, how, and even when work should be done. Indeed, survey after survey shows that those who have worked remotely for the first time in the wake of the pandemic want to continue doing so permanently for at least part of their workweek (in which case an employee would be said to engage in "hybrid work"). In response, management across not just the United States, but globally as well, have largely come to the same uniform conclusion: remote work should be a key part of the way work is done moving forward.

Two ways for how best manage and lead in this very different and fast-changing working environment. The first tool comes in the form of a philosophical, even introspective task for management. From the perspective of management experts (including this author), having to manage various types of work arrangements across a diverse workforce will require nothing less than the development of a new managerial mindset.

New research can build on this existing body of work to help the government take action today to move toward a positive future workplace tomorrow. This objective can guide policy and process improvements around HR practices and civil service modernization going forward.

Research Needed on New Tools that Move Government Toward an Evolving Future
Given these imperatives, for research to identify pathways for reimagining the government workplace, four pillars of talent management could be considered:

      I. Identification
      II. Acquisition
      III. Development
      IV. Application

Pillar I: Talent Identification
How can the government better identify and attract candidates for employment?

The government often follows a "moths to a light" approach to recruitment: posting approved vacancies on a government website and waiting for responses, hoping that the right candidate will both notice the advertised position and expend the energy to apply. This reactive process is not effective given the high competition for talent in today's marketplace.

Rather, early identification and focused cultivation are key. The full *identification-to-hire* process can benefit from research on how to become more proactive and data-driven. Recruiters need to learn about how best to leverage the right tools to aggregate and assess multiple sources to identify and engage potential candidates. Multiple current data sources can assist with talent identification -- including the government's USAJOBS site as well as numerous commercial matching sites – to develop an integrated candidate pool to address ever-shifting talent requirements with flexibility. As stated in the Harvard Business Review (arguably, with just a touch of pessimism): "Talent identification is an ongoing process of trial and error, and the point is not to get it right, but to find better ways to be wrong."

Pillar II: Talent Acquisition
What data and tools will improve the effectiveness of hiring and onboarding at the agency level?

Once identified, candidates for employment enter a process in which they have varying levels of confidence. Multiple interviews, security clearance processing, undefined avenues for growth, and inconsistent engagement by recruiters add stress to the process. Add to that an overall national discourse about government that has grown in contention and division in recent years, successfully acquiring talent by federal agencies has become significantly more challenging. Research on several tools could help agencies increase early engagement and improve the overall effectiveness of hiring at the agency level. These include:

- ***Share agency history***. An agency's history reflects and reinforces its culture. Generally, candidates for employment have already expressed interest in the agency. Early engagement that includes the robust sharing of historical knowledge

about the agency and its mission will help align a candidate with agency culture prior to onboarding -- "Culture fit is the glue that holds an organization together."

- **_Gamification_**. Virtual hiring offers a greater range of technical engagement, and gamified testing can assess performance in a simulated environment mirroring that of the agency. Gamification can influence, motivate, and connect candidates for employment, and can also help accelerate the candidate's preparation for employment.

- **_Artificial Intelligence._** AI and intelligent automation will make the hiring process faster and more accurate, both at the agency level and government wide. Augmenting the hiring process with AI and machine-learning provides recruiters, talent managers, and agency executives with advanced data assessment and decision-making tools.

Pillar III: Talent Development

Can agencies adopt more flexible training and development models that accelerate the time to proficiency for their employees?

Each agency has unique requirements to build essential knowledge, skills and abilities, all of which maps directly to that agency's mission. Within that highly customized framework are advances in training and learning, and research can assess how best to help accelerate performance and arm employees for tomorrow's challenges. For example:

- **_Pioneer innovative learning opportunities_**. Broaden outreach to academia and industry, identifying new opportunities for external assignments. Particularly in new technology and data-focused occupations, learning from academic labs and industry leaders offers new insight and a broader range of knowledge to each employee.

- **_Optimize the internal learning landscape_**. Agencies can leverage internal centers of excellence and align training outcomes across their organization. Optimizing the balance between centralized training (e.g., leadership, collaboration, innovation) and decentralized training (skills-building, occupation-focused) will improve overall efficiency and accelerate employee development.

- **_Adopt agile learning processes_**. Effective talent development incorporates new models of highly personalized and increasingly agile learning. Agency talent development for today's workforce should be more employee-centric, requiring more in-depth knowledge of employee potential and incorporating a wider range of learning and training opportunities. Training must be globally accessible and tailored to mission requirements. New training and development methods include:

- **_Simulation_**. Gives employees a chance to problem-solve in real time – in a team or individually.

- **_Microlearning_**. Focuses on essential content and is available when needed.

- **_Technology-based training_**. Improves traditional computer-based training (CBT) models by increasing scalability, collaboration, and mobility.

- ***Virtual learning***. Creates a virtual learning platform customized to the unique mission environment of your agency.

With rapid advances in smart technology, high performance computing, adaptive learning, and global mobility, agencies need to focus on the training and development models that best meet current and future workforce needs.

Pillar IV: Talent Application
How can emerging technologies, such as AI and virtual reality, fuel a shift in workplace practices that will increase employee engagement and support a more productive workforce?

Emerging technologies have fundamentally changed the workplace for today's employees. The historical career "ladder" – a step-by-step, rung-by-rung approach to professional development – now often resembles a career "lattice," with vertical and horizontal progression. The workforce increasingly wants a more diverse, customized learning framework.

Emerging technologies allow a blending of three traditionally distinct elements of any agency's learning program:

- **Learning FOR action** – The agency's training and education programs and infrastructure.
- **Learning IN action** – Professional experiences designed to advance the occupational skills and leadership of individual employees.
- **Learning FROM action** – Lessons learned, post-action reviews, peer-to-peer discussions, and another knowledge developed and made available corporately.

Research on the application of AI, machine-learning, virtual reality, smart technology (IoT), quantum computing and other leading technologies can provide managers with:

- New insight into organizational performance
- New tools for accelerating collaboration
- New measures of effectiveness
- New options for performance improvement (at the employee and team levels)

This technology-fueled insight, collaboration, and focus on performance will ultimately re-shape the workplace for speed, innovation and mission success.

Conclusion
Research to support the next wave of government workplace change can support a future workforce that is digitally astute, highly collaborative, exceedingly mobile, and naturally diverse. To acquire and retain the talent the government needs for success, the workplace for this new generation of government employee must be increasingly digital, fuel the collaboration the workforce demands, include remote work and work-from-anywhere capabilities, and allow the unique skills of each employee to be recognized, developed and applied to the agency's mission effectively.