7/28/2020

Remote Work in 2020

Tackling Barriers that Disrupt Workflow

Benjamin Gleason, PhD

PROSPECTUS GROUP·LLC

Introduction: New Life and Work Practices

As a result of covid-19, it can feel as if lives have been upended, with this public health crisis disrupting almost every daily routine, including work, school, social and recreational activities, and religious observation. The National Council for Mental Health recognized the severity of this disruption: "Everyone is in a state of alert, living much of the time in their lower, survival brain. Staff are worried about their jobs, how to care for children, if they or their family members will get sick."[1] One major disruption that impacted millions of workers in the United States is the trend of *remote work*. As a result of the risks associated with working in close physical proximity in enclosed spaces, many industries have turned to remote work as a solution. **According to Gallup polls conducted in May, 63 percent of respondents have worked at home in the past week. More specifically, 70 percent of those polled said they were sometimes or always working from home.** How do people feel about this sudden shift to remote work? Poll respondent were split, with approximately 25 percent reporting a desire to return to their workplace (office or school) if they could, and with roughly the same percentage expressing a desire to work from home, out of health and safety concerns. Interestingly, roughly half expressed a preference to continue working from home, if it were up to them.[2]
However, remote work presents a number of challenges as workers and supervisors face the likelihood of the need for new work practices in the face of increased risk to physical, mental, and emotional health. **Research has suggested that workers who are engaged--that is, if they feel "deep psychological and emotional attachment to their company and its success"-- are more likely to demonstrate resilience and perform better**.[3]

There are a number of ways to nurture engagement and support resilience, including enabling new communicative practices in the workplace. These new practices, such as the use of videoconferencing platforms like Zoom or Google Meet, have been suggested as important practices that aim to achieve organizational goals. These technologies aim to support the basic human need for social interaction (i.e., face to face contact). At the same time, many Americans live and/or work in places where the use of such internet and communications technology (ICT) is unreliable, cost-prohibitive, and/or inconsistent.

1 https://www.thenationalcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Building_Organizational_Resilience_in_the_Face_of_COVID-19.pdf?daf=375ateTbd56

2 https://news.gallup.com/poll/311375/reviewing-remote-work-covid.aspx

3 https://www.gallup.com/workplace/312695/key-factors-managing-essential-employees.aspx

The next two sections of this guide focus on:

1) how to support access to the internet in these areas; and
2) how to support access to the connected devices necessary for remote work.

Part I: Overcoming Barriers in a Networked World

The Digital Divide Persists in Rural Areas

The digital divide refers to the gap between those people who have reliable access to the internet and those who do not. When the term "digital divide" was coined, roughly 20-25 years ago, it was thought to be a temporary condition (and imagined to be a split between the "information haves" and "have nots"). Now, decades later, and made explicit by the real constraints of covid-19, it is clear that the digital divide has not been eliminated. Recent reports from Pew Research suggest the existence of this digital divide are particularly pronounced in rural areas. For example, while 79 percent of Americans in suburban areas reported having home broadband access (i.e., DSL, cable, or fiber optic internet access), only 63 percent of rural Americans reported home broadband. **In fact, rural Americans reported the least access to technology of all those surveyed-- they had lowest rates of smartphone, tablet, desktop computer, and broadband access.**[4] The Brookings Institution reported that upwards of 55 million Americans lack broadband access, with 14 million living in rural areas. The consequences of being an "information have not" comes with serious negative consequences: "Rural residents are at risk of being marginalized...already facing diminished life chances, people with lower incomes, people of color, the elderly, and foreign-born migrants in rural areas **run the risk of being on the wrong side of the digital divide that further exacerbates their economic, social, and political marginalization."**[5]

The digital divide affecting millions of people, especially those in rural areas, but also a fair number of urban citizens, is absolutely essential for work. In addition to increasing productivity, serving as a tool to support increased knowledge about health and associated behavior, and providing access to news, information, and networked connection, access to

4 https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/31/digital-gap-between-rural-and-nonrural-america-persists/

5 https://www.brookings.edu/longform/closing-the-digital-and-economic-divides-in-rural-america/

broadband and the internet enables equitable participation in a connected society. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) reported that in 2019 upwards of 4 million additional people gained broadband access, with many of those gains coming in rural areas. The FCC reported in 2017 that 85 percent of Americans had broadband access, concluding "the digital divide has narrowed substantially, and more Americans than ever before have access to high-speed broadband." In spite of such rosy pronouncements, there is a growing recognition, even among the FCC, that the digital divide still persists. FCC Commissioner Jeffrey Starks noted, **"Long-standing issues that disproportionately affect certain communities speak to me as issues of equity."** The digital divide "robs many of individual dignity, hamstrings the U.S. economy, and weakens our democracy."[6]

Strategies to Support Access in Georgia

There are a number of different approaches to mitigating the negative consequences of the persistent digital divide that affects rural, low-income, people of color, the elderly, and the foreign-born. These range from broad strategies enacted by communities to those that are available to individuals.

Communities have implemented a number of innovative approaches to providing internet access to its citizens, including providing 480,000 wifi-enabled buses to schools around the country. In a rural school district in California, buses with solar-powered wifi routers transport students during the day, and then are parked in neighborhoods to provide 24/7 internet access.[7] This trend is also occurring in Georgia, where upwards of 36 buses nicknamed the Wifi Rangers, provide mobile internet access in rural areas.[8] In Georgia, efforts to reach the nearly 1.6 million (mostly rural) residents without broadband access begun in earnest with the 2016 passage of Senate Resolution 876, which studied the consequences of lacking broadband, and with the 2018 passage of Senate Bill 401, that provides fundings for planning and deployment of broadband services.[9]

6 https://www.benton.org/blog/what-we-learned-about-digital-divide-2019

7 https://thejournal.com/articles/2015/04/30/wifi-on-wheels.aspx

8 https://patch.com/georgia/dallas-hiram/more-wi-fi-rangers-give-students-better-internet-access

9 https://www.georgiatrend.com/2019/12/31/transforming-digital-dirt-roads/

Georgia Broadband Deployment Initiative

At the state level, this led to the creation of the Georgia Broadband Deployment Initiative (GDBI) that provides information, updated service maps, and frequently asked questions (FAQs) through its online portal: https://broadband.georgia.gov/. This portal hosts a number of different resources to help citizens learn more about current and future plans to equip Georgia with broadband access so necessary to participate in a networked world. For example, the portal offers interested residents the Georgia Statewide Broadband Plan, which highlights efforts to map existing broadband service on a scale more fine-grained than that provided by the FCC. This statewide broadband service map, was undertaken in 2018 is one element of a plan to provide more accurate data about where to direct critical resources.

- **Covid Update** https://broadband.georgia.gov/georgia-internet-access-covid-19-update.
- **Access via Mobile Providers** (including popular providers such as AT&T, Verizon, and Sprint): https://broadband.georgia.gov/options-internet-mobile-phone
- **Map of Free Public Wifi in Georgia**: https://georgia-dca.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=5fed233c11c9417b940d93d8c0b68498
- **Wifi Access via Georgia Public Libraries**: https://georgialibraries.org/library-everywhere/
- **List of Resources from University of North Georgia**: https://ung.edu/information-technology/remote/connectivity-resources.php

Non-governmental Responses

In addition to these initiatives, it is also possible for individuals to access the internet through other means.

- **Free Wifi via Nord VPN**: https://nordvpn.com/blog/get-free-wifi/
- **Map of Free Wifi** (by zip code): https://www.wifimap.io/
- **Find Low-Cost Internet:** https://www.everyoneon.org/
- **EveryOne On:** https://www.everyoneon.org/

Take-Aways

It has been suggested by technology scholars, civic activists, and government leaders that broadband access is a requirement for full social, political, educational, and economic participation in a networked society. The state of Georgia has invested crucial resources, attention, and initiatives to provide broadband access to residents. In partnerships with private sector telecommunications providers, Georgia residents can continue to access the

internet through mobile phones and with other devices, at a broad range of locations, including public sector ones such as public libraries, schools, and with roaming hotspots, as well as private sector locations such as Starbucks and the like.

Part II: Mobile Devices

Introduction: The Need for Connected Devices

Many have argued that, aligned with the notion that access to broadband internet service is a requirement for full participation in a networked society, having access to a mobile device that can access the internet (e.g., a laptop, tablet, or smartphone) is also a necessity in todays' world. **For example, in 2015 the United Nations Human Rights Council proposed that internet access is a basic right. Without a connected device, however, people face serious marginalization and exclusion from functioning society.**

While the persistent digital divide reminds us of the great importance of reliable broadband access, the challenges from not having a networked device are becoming increasingly clear, "If you misunderstand that you misunderstand and trivialize a really big barrier to economic mobility and a source of economic inequality in this country," according to Chike Aguh who works to close the digital divide through his nonprofit called EveryoneOn (referenced in the above section). In fact, an article in the technology magazine *Wired* argued that **internet access on a connected device, such as an iPhone or similar smartphone, is not only a requirement, but can actually support greater health outcomes.**[10] Referencing a study at the University of Mississippi that used smartphones to track the blood sugar levels of diabetic patients, the use of smartphones provided over $300,000 in savings (by diverting patients from visits to the emergency room).

Ongoing Challenges

The creation of the Georgia Broadband Deployment Initiative (GBDI) demonstrated an explicit commitment to providing an essential need to a broad range of citizens across Georgia. When it comes to the provision of connected, mobile devices, efforts at the state level are directed through the Georgia Public Service Commission (PSC) (https://psc.ga.gov/), specifically through the LifeLine program that offers low-cost cell phone service (https://www.fcc.gov/general/lifeline-program-low-income-consumers).

10 https://www.wired.com/2017/03/no-iphones-arent-luxury-items-theyre-economic-necessities/

However, in 2013, the five member Georgia PSC added a $5 per month fee for those using the LifeLine program, which was marketed as a "free" service for neediest users.[11] Currently, LifeLine costs $9.25 per month and offers users 250 minutes per month and 2 GB of data. Approximately 10 percent of Georgia residents are enrolled in LifeLine.

Strategies to Support Acquiring Connected Devices

Currently, there are limited options in Georgia for those who need to acquire low-cost mobile devices, but the following organizations may be a good place to start:

- **Everyone On** One great resource is the aforementioned EveryOne On organization, which, with your zip code information (plus additional background information) will provide a list of low-cost providers in your area: https://www.everyoneon.org/
- **PCs for People** The Cobb Collaborative shared the following information on their website: "A nonprofit organization that provides low-cost computers and free or affordable internet connection for low-income households. Potential recipients must be living below the 200% poverty level and currently enrolled in a government assistance program." Info here: https://www.pcsforpeople.org/

Low-Cost Devices

One strategy may be the purchase of a Google Chromebook, which uses Google products and operating system to offer a cost-effective user experience. The following resources may provide some suggestions to get you started.[12]

- **Chromebooks Deals for July 2020** One reputable source for technology information is Tech Radar, who offers the following article: https://www.techradar.com/news/cheap-chromebook-deals
- **Chromebook Deals for August 2020** User-supported Tom's Guide offers recommendations as well: https://www.tomsguide.com/news/best-chromebook-deals
- **Best Chromebooks for 2020** Established source PC Magazine offers this advice in their summer article: https://www.pcmag.com/picks/the-best-chromebooks

11 https://www.ajc.com/business/georgia-charge-for-free-phone-program/9EgkoPvtMvMLxKdaxLelZP/

12 Please note: Prospectus Group does not endorse Google Chromebooks, and has not received any compensation for this report.

Take-Aways

There are a number of opportunities for individuals in Georgia to acquire low-cost mobile connected devices. While it is likely that there are other ways to acquire connected devices, there were a number of organizations that were repeatedly mentioned: Everyone On, and PCs for People. These two organizations may be valuable starting places for anyone looking for a device.

Finally, if funds are available to purchase a laptop, one cost-effective strategy might be Google Chromebooks. These relatively inexpensive laptops run the Google Operating System (OS) and use a variety of Google Apps to offer a seamless user experience.

Conclusion

Currently, it appears that the infrastructure and ecosystem supporting a systematic approach to broadband, and the related need for broadband-enabled mobile devices, is starting to take shape. In Georgia, like many other parts of the country, there is a great need for residents to have access to consistent, reliable, and affordable broadband in order for full economic, social, and political participation in society today. Across the state, there is a mix of public and private sector initiatives to provide low-cost connected devices and broadband internet access-- a true necessity of life and work in the twenty-first century.