Telework: The Next Normal
Industry Develops Return-to-Office Strategies

NAPERVILLE, ILL., March 22, 2021 – The COVID-19 pandemic has permanently altered the way industry employers think about telework. Although policies regarding relocation, geographic pay, and hybrid vs. permanent models remain in flux, the recent findings from the Content & Connectivity Human Resources (C2HR) Association's Compensation Surveys illustrate that — for many — working from home is here to stay.

Bolstering that conclusion are the speakers at C2HR's recent webinar "Talent Mindset for the Future of Work." Although they acknowledged that telework practices can be improved, executives from Cox Communications, Discovery Inc., and WarnerMedia revealed that remote work will be part of their employment strategies going forward.

"Making the shift to permanent remote work or returning to the office post-pandemic requires changes to traditional HR practices," said Pamela Williams, CAE, C2HR's executive director. "C2HR provides insights to help our industry navigate those changes."

In the last 12 months C2HR has made numerous pandemic-related resources available to its members and the industry. "We produced the Re-Entry Journey Webinar Series and expanded the HR Knowledge Center to include several COVID-19 HR topics from anxiety and mental health concerns to employment law and leading through the crisis," explained Williams.

"As part of our signature C2HR Annual Compensation Surveys we conducted just-in-time Pulse Surveys to gather data on pandemic response and an Essential Worker Survey. Most recently, we published a special edition of HR Pulse in which seven industry HR executives shared how their companies responded to the events of 2020."
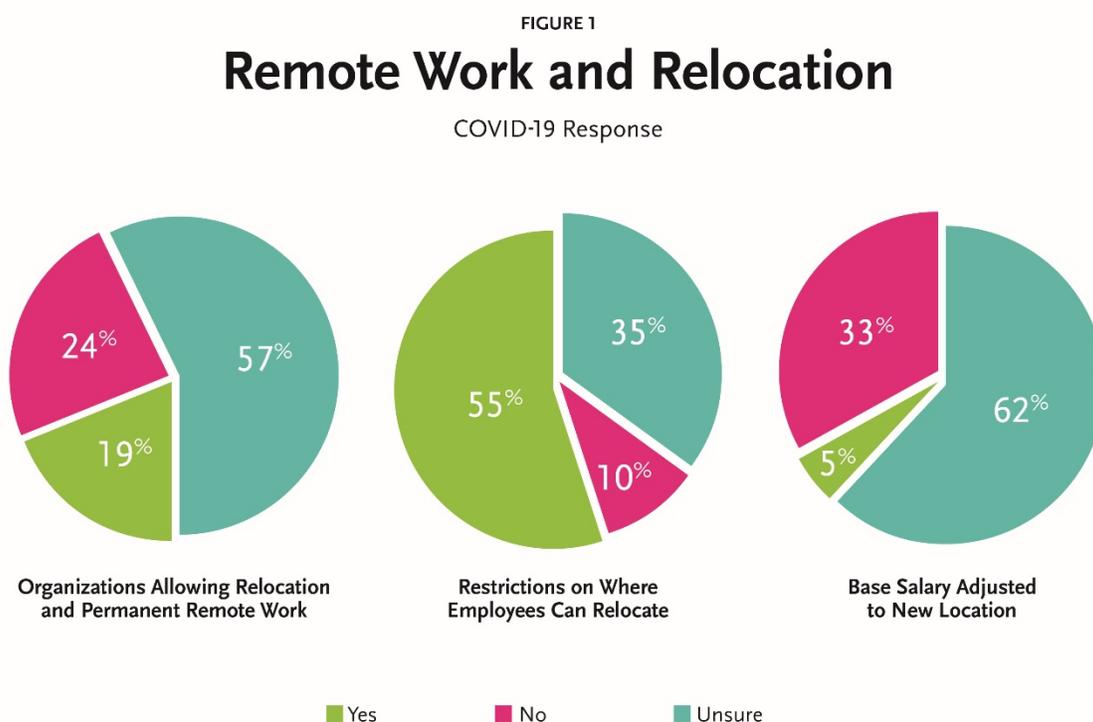
Adapting to Telework
C2HR's year-end "Pulse Survey for C2HR Industry Sectors: COVID-19 Response" reveals that most participants expect employees to work from home through the end of the first or second quarter of 2021 due to the continuing pandemic. Industry employers are working to identify how telework fits into their company cultures on a long-term basis.

"We have always had a flexible component to work, but a lot of it was predominantly based in the office," said Christopher Strazella, global head of talent acquisition, WarnerMedia. "Now we are looking at three constructs — in the office, the hybrid model (60/40 or flipped) and 100 percent remote." Strazella made his comments during C2HR's recent webinar.

Employee Relocations Expected

The Pulse Survey shows that 19% of organizations intend to allow permanent remote work and relocation for existing employees (**See Figure 1**)[1]. The year-end 2020 data also highlight that 55% of companies allowing relocation have restrictions regarding where employees can move (e.g., areas with existing operations, same state, same county), and 5% plan to adjust base salaries according to an employee's new location.

FIGURE 1

Remote Work and Relocation

COVID-19 Response

Organizations Allowing Relocation and Permanent Remote Work: 19% Yes, 24% No, 57% Unsure

Restrictions on Where Employees Can Relocate: 55% Yes, 10% No, 35% Unsure

Base Salary Adjusted to New Location: 5% Yes, 33% No, 62% Unsure

Legend: Yes / No / Unsure

SOURCE: DECEMBER 2020 C2HR PULSE SURVEY

By comparison, 2019 Compensation Survey data reveal that just 14% of connectivity providers and 10% of content developers offered telecommuting to all or most employees.

Nick Dunlap, vice president of executive compensation for Charter Communications, noted that telecommuting in our industry has historically been applied on a case-by-case basis, rather than a standard practice.

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[1] Includes data from C2HR content developers, connectivity providers and other invited organizations

"This is consistent with Charter's approach of using remote work rotations to support social distancing in our workplaces," Dunlap observed. With advances in virtual collaboration, "Flexible remote work arrangements as a component of a company's value proposition may become more common post-pandemic, but not necessarily in lieu of a traditional work model," he added.

Remote Work Gains Traction at Connectivity Companies
That movement has begun, as connectivity providers embrace telework more than their content counterparts. For example, 83% of connectivity respondents reported they plan to continue a work-from-home option for *all* employees, compared to 46% of content developers (**See Figure 2**). What about new employees? Among connectivity providers, 40% are hiring people who are permanently remote, versus 8% of content developers. Some of this difference is due to the nature of work, as much content creation is difficult to perform from home.

FIGURE 2
Return to Office and Geographic Pay
COVID-19 Response

EMPLOYMENT PRACTICE	PREVALENCE OF ACTIONS	
	Connectivity Providers	Content Developers
Continue remote work option for all	83%	46%
Continue remote work option for some	50%	58%
Allow existing employees to relocate and permanently remote work	60%	8%
Hire new remote-only employees	40%	8%
Adjust base salaries of existing employees who relocate and remote work	20%	0%
Adjust base salaries of new remote-only employees per location	20%	8%

SOURCE: DECEMBER 2020 C2HR PULSE SURVEY

That shift in thinking has been further fueled by the nimble hiring of many of the industry's broadband providers. For example, Cox Communications has hired more than 1,000 new people this past year, said Karen Bennett, Cox's executive vice president and chief people officer.

"Most have never entered one of our offices or had a person-to-person exchange with their prospective leader or their recruiter. Yet they are vibrant, and they are excelling, and they are learning our company," Bennett said.

"I think the expectations have been reset," continued Bennet. "Our companies have found themselves as productive, maybe even more productive, despite the fact that we haven't been in the office." Bennett made her comments during C2HR's recent webinar.

Julie Neimat, executive vice president of employee experience and HR operations at Discovery Inc., concurred. "We are looking at a future where working from home and differently in some fashion will be part of our normal work pattern going forward," she said. "I'm not just talking about home or office. I'm really talking about new locations. Possibly opening our doors to more diversity in our workforce and giving us access to different pools of talent."

Companies Consider Geography-Based Pay
The shift to telework has also exacerbated the need to consider pay differentials based on geography. Among connectivity companies, 20% intend to adjust base salaries for both relocated existing employees and new remote-only workers. However, only 8% of content developers said they planned to adjust salaries of new remote-only workers, and none said they would apply geographic differentials to relocated exiting employees (**See Figure 2**).

The nimbleness of connectivity providers adapting more quickly to geographic pay differentials is not surprising. For years, they have paid higher base salaries to installation and service technicians in the West and East, sometimes more than 10% for experienced technicians in the West. In 2020, prior to the pandemic taking hold, connectivity providers paid Level 3, Expert Technicians in the West 9% more in base salaries, while the same position in the South received 5% less than the standard base. (**See Figure 3**).

FIGURE 3

Installation/Service Tech Base Salaries

Difference By Geographic Region

	West	Southwest	Mountain	Midwest	South	East
LEAD	8%	-4%	2%	1%	-5%	1%
3 (EXPERT)	9%	-4%	0%	-2%	-5%	3%
2 (PROFICIENT)	7%	-1%	-1%	-2%	-4%	3%
1 (DEVELOPING)	9%	-2%	2%	-6%	-4%	2%

SOURCE: 2020 C2HR COMPENSATION SURVEYS

"More companies are talking about geographic pay bands," said Hali Croner, president and chief executive officer (CEO) of The Croner Company, the research and compensation consulting firm that conducted the Compensation Surveys for C2HR. "I think they will continue that and double down." Croner added that she expects to see companies implement transition periods for employees who relocate to a locality with a different pay structure.

Planning for the Return to Office
Not everyone will permanently work remotely. Industry employers are also grappling with how to safely return employees to the office. In the December 2020 Pulse Survey, they shared some of the strategies they are considering.

For example, 50% of connectivity providers and 17% of content developers reported modifying the work week and employee hours, or alternating groups of employees who come into the office. Some are analyzing duties to establish a rotation of employees that minimizes the number of unique people in each week. This approach supports workers who need to be in the office 100% of the time to do their job.

Companies also report creating unique workspaces for those who can't wear masks or finding alternatives ways to accommodate onsite personnel. When multiple departments are located close to each other and physical distancing is not possible, those departments have staggered days in the office.

"The pandemic was so sudden. Companies are carefully studying how to return workers to the office or establish telework in a way that is equitable both to front line workers who come in and employees who are remote," said Williams.

C2HR's webinar "Talent Mindset for the Future of Work," can be viewed on the association's YouTube channel. Additional findings from C2HR's 2020 Compensation Surveys can be found at: Streaming Jobs Garner Largest Pay Gains and C2HR Surveys Reveal Compassionate Compensation Actions. C2HR is currently enrolling participants for its 2021 Compensation Surveys. Interested parties can visit https://c2hr.org/compensation-surveys/ or contact Laurie Krashanoff at 415.485.5521.

ABOUT C2HR
Content & Connectivity Human Resources (C2HR) is a professional association serving 4,300 members from nearly 50 companies spanning the telecommunications, technology, media and entertainment sectors. C2HR provides industry-specific analytics, information and resources, as well as networking and educational opportunities. Its groundbreaking initiatives include it Annual Compensation Surveys and HR Symposium. For more information, visit www.C2HR.org.

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