

Admin Jobs Projected to Stay Remote After COVID-19

By Roy Maurer

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Clerical and administrative office workers—a group previously not often included in telework arrangements—will likely keep working from home after the COVID-19 pandemic wanes, according to new research.

The trend could result in significant labor cost savings and expanded recruitment opportunities unconstrained by geographical boundaries for employers—and it may attract more women into the labor force.

"A large majority of clerical and administrative office workers are women, so a shift to remote working may help to raise their labor force participation rates, as it could allow more unemployed women with family care responsibilities to be more connected to the labor market," said Gad Levanon, vice president, labor markets for The Conference Board, a New York City-based think tank that conducted the research.

"Job losses in retail, food services and education have predominantly affected women, so a change to the clerical and administrative work situation could benefit those who have lost their jobs in other industries," he said.

Brie Weiler Reynolds, career development manager and coach at FlexJobs, a Boulder, Colo.-based resources and jobs site for flexible and remote jobs, said the administration category in the company's database has "historically had a healthy amount of remote job offerings, and ads for virtual assistants specifically have been growing by leaps and bounds the past couple of years."

She added that many skills useful in retail and food services transfer well into office administrative roles, "so I am optimistic that the shift to remote work will create new opportunities for people [who were] laid off to make a career change into administration work."

[How have you adapted to the pandemic? Share your story with SHRM's Government Affairs Team

(<https://shrm.formstack.com/forms/resiliency>) as it educates decision-makers on crafting policies on work, workers and the workplace.]

Levanon explained that pre-pandemic, most flexible work arrangements were found in high-skilled, salaried, white-collar occupations, with the fastest growth in computer-related jobs. Business, financial and management occupations also experienced rapid growth in teleworking since the early 2000s, he said.

"Clerical and administrative jobs were rarely done primarily from home," he added. "Even in 2018, work-from-home rates in these occupations were well below those in [higher-skilled] office-related jobs."

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But analyzing millions of online job ads since the start of the year shows that the largest increase in the share of jobs that allow working from home are clerical and administrative jobs that don't require a bachelor's degree. These jobs include office support workers, legal support workers, financial clerks, and information and record clerks.

"There are some specific skills that make remote workers successful, and many of those skills align with skills that office support workers also need," Weiler Reynolds said. "This includes being very detail-oriented and organized, having strong proactive communication skills, being self-disciplined, being great at time and task management and planning, having adaptability, being adept at problem solving, and having high emotional intelligence."

[SHRM members-only toolkit: Managing Flexible Work Arrangements (www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pages/managingflexibleworkarrangements.aspx)]

Barriers to Remote Working

Levanon said there were several reasons why clerical and administrative office workers were less likely to work from home, but that the main one was that many of them are nonexempt workers (eligible for overtime pay), which creates complications in a remote work environment.

"Under the Fair Labor Standards Act, employers are required to regularly document their nonexempt employees' hours worked each day and total overtime earnings," he said. "Without formal policies or procedures in place outlining and tracking those hours of work and performance, employers can create employment law compliance issues or be open to liability."

More than half of respondents to an employer survey conducted by WorldatWork, the global HR association for compensation and benefits professionals, said their organization does not have telework policies and programs in place for nonexempt workers. "Many employers were unwilling or unable to invest the time and money needed to effectively transition these workers to telework," Levanon said.

"The good news for any companies concerned with this is that there are many time-tracking and compliance methods and programs available for remote teams to ensure they're staying on top of all the details, and there are more resources than ever to help remote managers and teams succeed," Weiler Reynolds said.

Levanon added that a large percentage of clerical and administrative office jobs are concentrated in traditionally more conservative industries such as government, law and insurance. "Workplace culture, along with lagging innovation, may have been a barrier to working from home, a privilege often reserved for high-skilled salaried workers," he said. "COVID appears to have smashed these barriers as the lockdowns forced companies to deal with these issues. This may be the beginning of a new massive shift to remote work for these jobs."

Increase in Remote Work Predicted to Last

There is a growing consensus that the share of remote workers overall will remain well above pre-pandemic rates.

"An increase in remote working could be the most influential legacy of COVID-19," Levanon said. "We expect that remote working will become the norm, or at least a widely practiced solution, for many employers."

Weiler Reynolds added that "unlike previously, when remote work was still viewed as a perk or a casual employee benefit, in this situation companies have no choice but to make remote work truly work, because there is no alternative. Instead of ad hoc use, we see the full deployment of remote work across many organizations, with managers and employees quickly building remote work programs and learning best practices."

She noted that many companies have announced that they are adopting remote work long term "after seeing how well it can work, not just to keep people safe but also in terms of productivity, cost savings, employee loyalty, environmental impact and many other benefits."

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