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Kitsap Sun

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Telecommuting here to stay in Kitsap

Josh Farley Kitsap Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

POULSBO - The lights still shine on cubicles decorated with odd trinkets and family photos. Coats to keep warm from the chills of early March line desk chairs. A green-thumbed employee, thankfully, gathered up the desk plants before they withered.

Most of the employees have been gone for months.

The parking lot at Systems Design West, an ambulance billing company at the top of Powder Hill in Poulsbo, is sparse with cars these days. Yet its staff of more than 100 employees still clocks in each day — it's just that most do so through a Virtual Private Network, or VPN, without leaving home.

In one weekend in March, as the novel coronavirus began to spread worldwide, its leadership scrambled to realign the company around a dispersed

workforce.

"We'd never even explored the option of telecommuting," said company CEO Jenn Braus. "We had to move a mountain in a very short amount of time."

The company's transition was common for many in a world suddenly beset by a pandemic. But the surge in telecommuters looks permanent, even after COVID-19 subsides.

Employees have newfound job flexibility while employers have reported

similar, and even improved, productivity — all while the expenses of the commute and office space can be cut. Braus and company leadership recently surveyed its staff and found about 90% of employees "have loved working from home."

"It is 100% guaranteed we will have employees at home post-pandemic," Braus said. "Without a doubt."

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Pride amid the pandemic



Above: David Emmons hands a "Pride in a Box" to a participating vehicle during the Kitsap Pride drive-thru event at Pendergast Park in Bremerton on Saturday. Handing out boxes with celebratory items replaced the usual Kitsap Pride festival typically held the third weekend in July at Evergreen-Rotary Park in Bremerton. It was canceled this year because of the pandemic. **Left:** Mikey D'Olympia gives a wave while helping out at the Kitsap Pride drive-thru event at Pendergast Park in Bremerton on Saturday.

PHOTOS BY MEEGAN M. REID/KITSAP SUN

Officials: Increasing virus cases concerning

Austen Macalus Kitsap Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

Concerns about the coronavirus making a resurgence in Kitsap County have become a reality as COVID-19 has rapidly spread over the past month, reflecting troubling trends seen across the country after states rolled back restrictions meant to curb the virus.

Since about mid-June, Kitsap County has seen a deluge of COVID-19 cases — adding about five new cases every day — that surpasses even the first weeks of the pandemic. The dramatic increase is a stark contrast compared with April and May, when stringent stay-at-home orders were in place.

The recent trend has been cause for concern for Kitsap health officials, who worry the current rise could soon strain the local health care system.

"This increase in cases that we are seeing has been a larger and more sustained increase," Kitsap Health Officer Dr. Susan Turner said in an interview with the Kitsap Sun. "We don't know what is going to happen weeks down the road, but right now the outlook is very concerning."

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Turner

South Kitsap schools to offer 'flex' model

Chris Henry Kitsap Sun
USA TODAY NETWORK

SOUTH KITSAP - South Kitsap School District, like other districts preparing for fall amid continuing COVID-19 outbreaks, is hoping for the best, planning for the worst.

"While we are all hopeful for a full return to school this fall, we have made alternative plans based on guidance from the Department of Health, Kitsap Public Health District, and the Office of the

Superintendent of Public Instruction," the district said in a notice posted Thursday on its website. "We know that anything short of a complete return to school will cause disruptions to all our lives, but as always, our priority is the health and safety of our students and staff."

Like other local public school districts, South Kitsap is offering parents the choice for their students between all-online instruction or a part-time return to the classroom with supplement-

tal online learning.

The school board must officially approve the back-to-school plan. Superintendent Tim Winter will present the plan at the board's virtual meeting at 5 p.m. Wednesday, which is open to the public.

Under South Kitsap's "SK Flex" model, roughly 50% of students in grades 2-12 will be in classrooms two days a week. Wednesday will be a day for

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Telecommuting

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A lot to like for employers and telecommuters

Before the pandemic, around 30% of employees could work from home, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. That number skyrocketed, by one estimate, to a staggering 74% of professionals ages 18 to 74 in May, according to a survey conducted by YouGov in partnership with USA TODAY and LinkedIn.

Telecommuting on a mass scale wasn't likely to expand without a catastrophic event — something to push it over the edge into the mainstream. "We thought it would most likely be an earthquake, honestly," said Ed Stern, a Poulsbo City Councilman and long-time telework advocate who helped bring awareness and Legislature-funded telework pilot projects to Kitsap starting in the early 2000s.

"It's human nature to stay with the devil you know than the devil you don't," Stern said.

Now, the situation has reversed: who comes back to the office when it's over?

From the biggest companies — like Facebook — to small cities like Port Orchard, leaders are eyeing the work-from-home surge as permanent for differing reasons. There's a lot to like in telework: fewer interruptions. More focused meetings. No commute. A more comfortable environment — indeed, your own.

At CI Security, a Bremerton-based cybersecurity firm, co-founder and Chief Information Security Officer Mike Hamilton said his company is evaluating what it would mean for most or all of its 80-plus employees to work from home for good. Its force largely went home in March. Hamilton points to the benefits of finding new talent and keeping it.

"Remote work for analysts means that we can use a national recruiting model and work with universities across the country," Hamilton said.

Trading a commute by car to one down the hallway also can mean getting rid of unneeded office space. The Washington State Department of Transportation has almost 3,000 people working from home and will examine "utilizing higher numbers of teleworking personnel compared to pre-pandemic levels to reduce our facilities footprint," said Kris Rietmann Abrudan, a WSDOT spokeswoman.

About 25% of Bremerton and Port Orchard's city workforces are working at home. Port Orchard Mayor Rob Putaansuu said the city is working this month to establish a teleworking policy, "as it appears that this type of work could be around long term," he said.

Bremerton Mayor Greg Wheeler believes there's a side benefit: with more city employees at home and less driving to city hall at the Norm Dicks Government Center, it can free up coveted parking spaces in downtown Bremerton for employees and patrons of local shops and restaurants.

And speaking of freeing up parking, even the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard has 2,200 employees at home for the first time ever.

There are, of course, drawbacks to working from home. About a third of Kitsap County's 1,147 employees have been working from home, according to county human resources director Nancy Buonanno Grennan.

It has resulted in higher morale, she said, though there might be a limit to how long that lasts. She noted that some miss in-person interactions.

"Working through issues face to face is easier sometimes, especially if there is creative problem-solving going on," she said.

And then there are those for whom telecommuting just isn't possible: UPS drivers, firefighters, grocery checkers and more. Ron Johnson, a professor at the University of Washington's information school, points out that remote work is only there for members of a "privileged, professional class."

"There's a very large population that has to just show up and work," he said.



Jenn Braus, CEO of Systems Design West, is reflected in the front door of their Poulsbo office on Thursday. MEEGAN M. REID/KITSAP SUN

'The New Home Office' series

This story is the first in a series examining the surge of telecommuting in the COVID-19 pandemic and the pressure it's placing on Kitsap's internet.

Coming Monday: How a local utility is feverishly expanding fiber-optic cable around Kitsap amid a crushing demand for better internet connectivity.

Coming Tuesday: From most remote regions of Kitsap, some residents are taking the job of getting fast internet into their own hands — if they can afford it.

Balancing work life at home

About 54% of people didn't have a remote work setup before the government moved to curb nonessential gatherings, the YouGov survey found. There has yet to be a full reckoning for those who stay home permanently about what employers provide in-home for teleworking employees. Should they pick up part of the power bill, for instance, or purchase ergonomically-correct furniture for home offices?

Susan Newkirk, accounts receivables manager for Braus' Poulsbo ambulance billing company, said she carved out an office in her Silverdale home out of her son's old bedroom, overlooking the yard and her hummingbird feeder. She uses a chair she took home from the office. She likes the opportunity to sit in the sun on lunch breaks.

But she does miss the personal connection to colleagues, though her home office includes a comfy chair for her cat.

"You can't just pop into somebody's cubicle or office," she said.

There was also the added challenge for working parents, who during the pandemic have gone without schooling and childcare. Scenes of children roaming in the backgrounds of Zoom meetings have become commonplace. Denise Steele, a Silverdale independent Scentsy consultant and mother of two young children, would sometimes pop in an earbud so the kids could say hello.

"I don't feel like you can ever really find the balance," Steele said. "There's never enough time for family, never enough for work."

Steele, who was working from home even before the pandemic struck, offers the advice of arranging with a partner or other caregiver to plan for those times when you need some hours without distraction. She and her husband were fortunate to have grandparents in the picture, so she could blast through a day's work without interruption.

Buonanno Grennan said the county allowed its employees to flex hours for parenting and remote school.

"Some employees actually took some form of leave because it got so burdensome, but most others were able to make it work," she said.

Hamilton of CI Security said the greater flexibility of home work has helped to acclimate to the new reality.

"We're all people here, and we just hit the same air pocket together," he said. "So we're figuring it out together."

How one company went home in one weekend

In many cases at the start of the pandemic, companies had no choice but to go to telework. Braus remembered thinking before COVID-19 that working from home would be risky because the company works with sensitive health data.

As Gov. Jay Inslee announced more restrictions, Braus and company leaders had to think fast — and accessorize for the transition in one weekend. They raided every electronics store between Kitsap and Tacoma for power strips. There was a fortuitous purchase of all new computers in the company in 2019. Their solution was to take the old models, thankfully still on site and in storage, and distribute them to staff for the home office. That way, company employees could log in to their machines at work using a VPN and second-factor authentication.

"That way, the data stays here," Braus said of the Poulsbo office.

The deluge of workers establishing home offices flooded Help Desk Cavalry, a Bremerton information technology firm. Steve Treanor, president and CEO, said his biggest concern was ensuring employees moved out of the office but not away from a secure computer.

"We helped them establish firewalls, install anti-virus software, start two-factor authentication," he said. "Security was our biggest concern."

In those early stages, Braus acknowledged she didn't know quite how the staff would react to teleworking. She's proud of the culture they'd developed in the office.

"How could we know they're not clocking in and watching Netflix?" she said. "We have a great staff but they'd just not worked from home before."

The company ultimately invested in software that tracks the company computer use. Braus said she's been pleased with productivity across the board.

Some companies are using webcams to monitor employees in their home office. Others have concluded that if an employee is accomplishing the tasks set by bosses, measuring seat time is not a worthwhile endeavor.

The company still has around two-dozen employees at the worksite, as much of the billing needs to be sent via U.S. mail. And, Braus added, some employees did opt to come back to the office. Shoddy Internet speeds and home distractions made the telecommute difficult, she said. And not everyone likes the isolation of it. Braus herself misses the spontaneous conversations that come with office life.

"It's just not the same," she said.

But she knows "the Pandora's Box has been opened," she added. For her company, retention may go up simply by offering employees an opportunity to work where they want. She even has an employee moving to Montana that she hopes to keep.

Jess Mooney, Cavalry's marketing director, believes the surge in workers at home will create greater flexibility for employees that will last beyond the pandemic.

She uses an example: What if an employee could go home after a doctor's appointment when there's only one hour left on a shift? Or a worker with a sick child at home that could get work done there instead?

"It's a huge shift in mindset," she said.

Braus, for her part, has actually been one of the few working from the office during COVID-19. One reason she doesn't telework is her cable internet connection at her home on Bainbridge Island "was a nightmare," she said.

When she thinks about those who live in her neighborhood — a software engineer, a commercial banker, a sales manager — she realizes they're all working there, too.

"It's a new normal," she said. "My entire neighborhood is working from home."

This week, crews from a local public utility are just finishing the installation of fiber-optic cable to vastly increase speeds at her home — an option for those who can afford it.

Josh Farley is a reporter covering the military for the Kitsap Sun. He can be reached at 360-792-9227, josh.farley@kitsapsun.com or on Twitter at @joshfarley. Consider supporting local journalism in Kitsap County: Sign up for a digital subscription today.

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Schools

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teachers to check in with students and do planning while buildings are cleaned and sanitized. The remaining students will attend the other two days. Students will receive remote instruction on the three days they aren't in school buildings.

Kindergartners, first-graders and some students receiving special education services will attend four days each week.

All South Kitsap students will be automatically enrolled in the SK Flex model unless they opt-out.

South Kitsap's "Online Academy" will follow a typical school day schedule. It will include virtual live instruction and/or recorded video lessons, as well as small group check-in.

As a contingency plan, the district states, SK Flex students could transition to remote learning if schools are ordered by the state to close at any point during the year, as happened in March when cases of COVID-19 in Washington state were increasing exponentially.

The question of whether school can open at all in September was thrown into question this week when Washington health officials and Gov. Jay Inslee said that can only happen if communities holistically embrace measures like social distancing and wearing masks to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Kitsap has increased significantly over the past month, with 178 new cases since June 17 and 43 active cases reported Friday by the Kitsap Public Health District.

South Kitsap School District, like other districts, has incurred new costs for staffing, PPE and cleaning materials because of the COVID-19 pandemic. District officials are factoring those costs into the draft budget for the 2020-21 school year.

The district had spent \$205,277 on COVID-related expenses as of Friday, said Jennifer Farmer, assistant

superintendent of business and operations.

"South Kitsap began the process of budgeting for the ever-shifting landscape of the pandemic in early April," Farmer said. "While there are uncertainties about what the next school year will bring, we are preparing to support students and staff safety with additional orders of gloves, masks, hand sanitizer, wipes and other materials needed for cleaning."

The district will also replace some aging Chromebook devices early to support the potential need for additional remote learning. The district expects to spend more than \$500,000 before the start of the school year on PPE, cleaning materials and Chromebooks.

South Kitsap has been allocated \$1.5 million in CARES Act coronavirus relief money being distributed by the state. The district recently received instructions on how to get reimbursed for COVID-related expenditures and will likely tap the CARES Act fund multiple times throughout the year as it accrues expenses, Farmer said. The school district must also share the allocation with private education programs eligible for federal Title I dollars.

South Kitsap is not facing a budget shortfall for 2020-21 — unlike North Kitsap and Central Kitsap school districts — but it may need to tap its fund balance (savings) to balance the budget, Farmer said.

"It is difficult at this time to project the full effects of COVID on enrollment, staffing, technology or supplies in the coming year, but we continue to monitor the situation closely so we can adapt and respond to changing needs," Farmer said.

There will be a public hearing on the draft budget on Aug. 5 with budget adoption on Aug. 19. A copy of the draft budget and information on attending the meeting are available by emailing millera@skschools.org.

Chris Henry reports on education and community news for the Kitsap Sun. Reach her at (360) 792-9219 or christina.henry@kitsapsun.com. Support coverage of local news by signing up today for a digital subscription.