The Telework Transition

A Candid Survey of Federal and State and Local Government Employees on Telework

October 2020
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Overview

Purpose

The public sectors’ overnight transformation to a remote working environment is unprecedented. On March 11th, the World Health Organization announced that COVID-19 was officially a global pandemic, and on March 15th, the Office of Management and Budget began offering “maximum telework” as an option for federal agencies for all telework eligible employees. Child-care, education, transportation, logistics, senior care, retail, entertainment have all been impacted with varying projections on what changes will be sustained.

With the safety requirements mandated in response to COVID-19, public sector employees found new ways to work communicate, collaborate, and learn. This survey intends to capture lessons learned from this phase of the Covid-19 response (remote work phase), to understand how the public sector may change as a result of this experience, and to identify practices to support agencies going forward. Most public sector employees believe working protocols have changed permanently so it is important to understand the lessons learned from this experience.

Methodology

From June to July of 2020, Government Business Council (GBC) issued a survey on telework fielded to the government. 441 employees responded, including 62% of respondents identifying as GS/GM-13 or above and 40% of C-Suite level respondents in state and local government.

For more information on respondents, please see the Respondent Profile.
Executive Summary

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**Attitudes on the remote work environment vary widely and are at the extremes**

When asked to define their work-life since COVID-19 period began, those who viewed remote work positively used words such as: excellent, productive, liberating, and better. At the same time, those who do not enjoy working from home described the same period as: challenging, stressful, hectic, and frustrating.

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**About half of respondents consistently had positive feedback about their agency’s impact during this remote work phase**

52% of respondents say they felt that their agency was prepared for the shift to remote work; 47% say that they believe the remote work experience will ultimately better enable their organization to meet its mission; 50% noted that their work-life balance has improved since they began working remotely. Organizations should work to capture lessons learned from those thriving in a work-from-home environment.

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**Responses reveal two factors — adequate technology and office culture— prove most challenging while working remotely**

28% of respondents identify inefficient remote processes, and third said that better collaboration tools would most improve their remote work situation. Investigating these inefficiencies and shifting to technologies that better enable a remote workforce would be an asset to government employees.

About 2 in 5 government employees cited work-life balance as their greatest barrier to successful remote work. Often, when asked to explain their answers, employees discussed inadequate or unsafe direction from leadership.

Pre-Covid

Understanding the government’s posture before the pandemic

Before March 2020, many federal agencies and state and local governments had some experience with telework, but the majority of organizations did not allow staff to work from home often. On March 11th, the World Health Organization announced that COVID-19 was officially a global pandemic, and on March 15th, the Office of Management and Budget began offering “maximum telework” as an option for federal agencies for all telework eligible employees.¹

Prior to the COVID-19 remote work phase, how often did government employees in your organization work remotely?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>State/Local</th>
<th>Federal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>24%</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fewer than 20% of government employees worked remotely often or always before maximal telework was mandated by the government.

Government employees believe remote work will likely remain a permanent fixture going forward

42% of respondents say that telework became mandatory for most staff, indicating that a hybrid model is the most popular approach for most organizations.

More than 3 out of 4 respondents feel that the public sector will continue remote work even after the acute COVID-19 period.
Respondents had a divided response when asked about agency preparedness

How prepared was your agency for remote telework prior to the COVID-19 crisis?

- 35% somewhat or very prepared
- 22% somewhat prepared
- 13% neutral
- 12% somewhat unprepared
- 17% very unprepared

52% felt that their agency was some degree of prepared, with 17% saying their agency was very prepared.

While a larger portion of respondents say that their organization was somewhat or very prepared, a significant portion (35%) say that their organization was unprepared. More than 1 in 10 say their organization was very unprepared. On the whole, state and local employees were more likely to describe their organization as prepared.
Employees generally approve of their agency’s handling of both internal and external processes in the new remote era.

78% of respondents say their organization was moderately to extremely effective at managing processes such as human resources, IT, and acquisitions during the remote phase.

76% of respondents feel that their organization has been moderately to extremely effective in managing citizen-serving, public processes while they have been out of the office.
“During the COVID-19 crisis, my biggest workplace challenge has been ______________.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining work/life balance</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inefficient processes that were more difficult to perform remotely</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of appropriate collaboration tools</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient training to support remote work</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudden change in my individual responsibilities</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security clearance restrictions on remote work</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentage of respondents, n=403
Respondents were asked to select up to three options.

Although work/life balance was the most common issue, when asked to describe their greatest workplace challenges, many described technological issues. For instance, Virtual Private Network problems, lack of printers and monitors for laptops, and not having a proper workplace at home were common complaints.
Respondents who responded “Other” described challenges such as the following:

“Laptops were much slower than our desktops in the office.”

“There were no real challenges. The process worked smoothly. Way more productive working from home as there were less unmanageable interruptions.”

“Dealing with a boss who ignored virtually all public health guidelines and routinely made comments that he did not believe in teleworking.”

“Working from home was immediately banned during the crisis.”

“Others’ childcare and health issues.”

“Software not conducive to remote work: 40-year-old financial system and workflow requiring in-office presence.”
Remote work efficiencies discovered as a result of Covid-19 are seen as welcome enhancements to agency operations.

**What impact do you believe remote work caused by COVID-19 will have on the public sector's ability to conduct operations/meet its mission?**

- **Very negative impact**: 6%
- **Somewhat negative impact**: 24%
- **Neutral impact**: 23%
- **Somewhat positive impact**: 31%
- **Very positive impact**: 16%

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.
When asked to explain, answers revealed polarized experiences during the pandemic:

“Time and resources that could have been directly applied to fulfilling the mission have been diverted to just keeping things operational.”

“Some processes are impossible to do remotely due to equipment that crosses an array of sophistication and or compatibility levels.”

“There’s a lack of transparency and times when a customer needs direct access.”

“Timeframes on getting things accomplished were longer. Community members did not initially know where to go or how to access services.”

“It will create a severe lack of resources because of revenue shortfalls combined with increased expenses.”

“Observations indicate significant inefficiency working from home without effective accountability. Sadly, most agency staffers wasted much of our time and salary commiserating via social media during work hours.”
When asked to explain, answers revealed polarized experiences during the pandemic:

“It caused us to focus on our ‘Why.’ Why are we doing what we are doing?”

“As an engineer: increased personal responsibility, less management and bureaucracy.”

“Almost all military and GS personnel at my 1-star command were able to complete 98% of their work at home.”

“I think it has allowed others to have a better work-life balance and reconnect with their loved ones and family.”

“I think its shown how nimble, responsive, and innovative local government can be.”

“Its an opportunity to learn to collaborate and communicate between the field and administration—more immediate response with clearer answers.”

“It enables staff to work without interruptions. It is a positive on the environment, less driving, fewer emissions.”
Adapting to the “New Normal”

Organizations have room for improvement in supporting their employees while remote

From day one after organizations shifted to a remote environment, teams have been troubleshooting problems and discovering best practices to maintain organizational capacity. While there is a notable divide in employee sentiment about mission-capability while remote, 66% were in agreement that their organizations successfully enabled flexible schedules for their workforce.

Almost half said that their organization has successfully provided collaboration tools. At the same time, 23% say that their greatest challenge is inadequate collaboration tools.

Almost 4 in 10 applaud communication from their leadership as a success during this transition. Just under a quarter said they were happy with how their agencies supported parents caring for young children. As schools cope with the pandemic through adapted schedules and remote classrooms, leadership should consider avenues to support families.
Since the remote work phase began, I find that I am_________________________________________.

Respondents had varied responses about the quality of their work-life balance during this time.

40% of respondents say that they are better able to manage their work-life balance since the remote period, yet 33% say that their work-life balance has declined. Any respondents provided qualitative responses that indicated an inability to shut off after the standard 8-hour workday.
Respondents say that process automation/efficiency would be the biggest asset to their work

Almost 40% of respondents say that more efficient processes would improve their remote work situation.

Following more efficient/automated processes, 1 in 3 say they would most benefit from improved collaborative tools. Interestingly, communication is a top concern, yet more than a quarter say that fewer meetings would make remote work better.
1 in 3 respondents says their career trajectories were impacted by the pandemic

Respondents identify potential areas of improvement in the way their agency approaches the acquisition and implementation of new capabilities. According to respondents, many agencies may not be considering the long-term implications of individual IT procurement decisions.

How has the pandemic impacted your career plans?

- No impact: 68%
- Led me to consider commercial opportunities: 11%
- I will retire earlier than I had previously planned: 9%
- I will retire later than I had previously planned: 12%

Percentage of respondents, n=386
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding
Respondents who manage contractors say they will be more comfortable with having remote contractors in the future

42% of all respondents report that they manage contractors.

GBC asked those who manage contractors if they would be more comfortable than they had been in the past managing a team of contractors remotely. 18% said they would not feel more comfortable managing a remote team of contractors. 42% said their opinion had not changed in light of the remote work period. Meanwhile, 39% said they agree that they would use remote contractor services in the future.
What Respondents Say...

*How would you describe your work life during the COVID-19 remote work phase?*

One-word descriptions of remote work vary widely and are at the extremes: Productivity and efficiency was the common theme of those who viewed remote work positively.
What Respondents Say...

How would you describe your work life during the COVID-19 remote work phase?
Those who viewed the remote work period negatively frequently used words like challenging, stressful, and isolated.
What Respondents Say…

What lessons have you learned in your work experience during the COVID-19 era that might benefit your government colleagues?

| “We have been able to meet more often via Zoom than we did in the past to share ideas” |
| “Be independent, set schedules, and maintain consistency and open communication” |
| “Increased remote work requires even more time for communication and updates so all parties are kept apprised of progress” |
| “In person meetings are more efficient, therefore, reduce number of virtual meetings” |
| “Email is a bad way to make important decisions” |
| “Absence/reduction in commuting provides great reduction in stress” |
| “Collaboration and regular communication with the supervisor and team are critical for performance.” |
| “Our ability to adapt to new situations is clearly greater than we imagined.” |
| “Resist the tendency to work longer hours and take breaks” |
| “Look for a career in the private sector” |
| “Agencies should spend money on cables, fiber, and tubes that can handle capacity needed to work remotely” |
| “Stay positive with your constituents and communicate often. Give clear direction and state the facts” |
| “Employees are not working from home—they are living at work” |
What Respondents Say...

What lessons have you learned in your work experience during the COVID-19 era that might benefit your government colleagues?

“Create a workspace that is isolated and not easily approached when off work”

“Take opportunities that you wouldn’t have otherwise (re-connecting with family, exercising, and hobbies)”

“Have virtual coffee breaks with team members, updates from management, have quiet Fridays where there are no meetings scheduled”

“Manage the expectations of those who want to work in-person”

“My telework experience has been smooth because I don’t have small children. I cannot imagine balancing work, caring for children, and overseeing online school”

“Taking breaks and time off is more important than ever to prevent burnout”

“Quantify the work of your subordinates”

“Eliminate meetings – downstream effects on your team will be significant and positive”

“Strong, clear leadership from the top down is extremely important to keep things flowing smoothly”

“We can be more flexible and still accomplish our goals, while maintaining security, safety, and privacy for citizen”

“Stand up meetings like a development scrum 2-3x per week; this works well for our internal team sync”

“Create emergency HR policies”

“There is need for more empathy and flexibility for employees; build in more free time for relaxation”

“Take time to understand the work that others are responsible for”
Things have changed. Public sector professionals are participating in one of the largest work-place experiments in history. Without preparation, they moved away from government buildings to conduct the government’s business from home. They continue to make the best of the situation, but as indicated in their survey responses, remote work is here to stay... and there is clearly room for improvement. EY supports commercial and public sector organizations navigating this transition and offers the following considerations.

Transition Considerations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People</th>
<th>Recruiting: If remote work is possible, can we tap a wider employee pool for select positions? Are there new skills we should be considering for specific positions?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Training: What new training topics may be required to support an effective remote workforce?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communications: Can we re-imagine more efficient meetings and messaging? More immediately, are we maintaining proactive communications to provide guidance and expectations for remote work and return to work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>Operational model: If we decide we can have remote workers, can we have remote teams operating across time zones to allow for extended processing time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Process Improvement: Some processes cannot be done off site very well so what processes can be automated or redesigned?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Policies: What new policies and procedures are required for the return to work phase and for the potential of long-term remote work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Infrastructure: What technologies (telecommunication, network, etc) work and what does not? Is our infrastructure adequate?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Security: Does our security support widespread remote work? What new threats should be considered?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collaboration: Do our tools support collaboration and knowledge sharing?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Build a roadmap for Transition and Transformation

The response to COVID-19 has changed priorities, behaviors and expectations – making those in government roles rethink the way they do business and engage with their workforces. Resilience has become front and center and has put agency leaders in the spotlight as problem solvers. Consider the return to work by applying a two-gear approach:

- **Re-Opening**: deliver a trusted transition focused on employee **health and safety**; and
- **Transforming**: create future-focused transformation that reimagines an **optimized workplace** for the long term.

For an agency to manage the change resulting from this remote work experience, we recommend a transition and transformation road map to visualize how leaders can maintain momentum on critical initiatives through a focus on building their organizational culture and strengthening team performance across the workforce. Resilience and adaptability have become front and center and have put agency leaders in the spotlight as problem solvers. The EY Government and Public Sector (GPS) team is ready to support you in this journey.

For information on managing the response, Click Here: Re-Opening and Transforming
Final Considerations

When considering how to lead a physically distanced organization:

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Understand the remote experience of your workforce

Government employees have wildly different perceptions of work during the pandemic. Some are still reporting to work; some are going to the office less frequently; some are on their couches. Many employees feel liberated with their reclaimed commute time, while others feel trapped in a workplace they never leave. Organizations should harness user experience concepts such as user profiles and journey maps to understand what their employees are going through to better support them.

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Enable flexibility, but protect your employees from burnout

66% say their organization has succeeded in giving them more flexibility in their schedules as they navigate this new normal, however, unbridled flexibility may not work for everyone. Many respondents mentioned an inability to shut off for the day after they clock their 8-hours. Investing in more efficient processes to help employees with their workloads would prove helpful. Leadership should also consider instilling a workplace culture where rest is rewarded.

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Productivity and efficiency define positive employee experiences

Those enjoying their time working from home were most likely to describe the period as productive, relaxed, efficient, and adaptive. In-person processes often do not translate directly to remote processes. Managers should consider realigning the structure of their team, the responsibilities of individuals, and the timelines of individual and team goals to redesign critical processes for remote work. Breaking down mission-goals into smaller components and examining technological barriers would allow employees to feel more productive and less frustrated.
Respondent Profile

A majority of respondents are in state and local government

Employment

- Federal Civilian: 63%
- DoD: 14%
- State/Local: 23%

How long have you worked in government?

- More than 30 years: 30%
- 15 to 30 years: 34%
- 10 to 15 years: 18%
- 5 to 10 years: 13%
- Less than 5 years: 5%

54% of respondents identify as GS-13 or above, including members of the Senior Executive Service, General/Admiralty, and Major/Commander.
Respondents represent a wide range of job functions

Respondents were asked to choose which single response best describes their primary job function.

**Job function**
- Agency leadership: 19%
- Program/project management: 7%
- Administrative/office services: 7%
- Technical/scientific: 7%
- Information technology: 7%
- Human resources: 6%
- Public Safety and Justice: 6%
- Finance/operations: 5%
- Acquisition/procurement: 5%
- Policy research/analysis: 4%
- Education: 3%
- Audit/inspectors general: 3%
- Legal: 3%
- Transportation/infrastructure: 2%
- Communications/public relations: 2%
- Healthcare / Health and Human Services: 2%
- Facilities management: 2%
- Other: 11%

**Reports / Oversees**
- None: 33%
- Over 200: 5%
- 51 to 200: 10%
- 21 to 50: 10%
- 11 to 20: 10%
- 6 to 10: 11%
- 1 to 5: 22%

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Percentage of respondents, n=379
Federal respondents come from a diverse group of agencies, and 63% are ranked GS/GM-13 or above.

### Job grade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senior Executive Service</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GS/GM-15</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GS/GM-14</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GS/GM-13</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GS/GM-12</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GS/GM-11</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GS/GM-10 or below</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General/Admiral</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonel/Captain</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lt. Colonel/Commander</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major/Lt. Commander</td>
<td>1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Agencies represented

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Army</td>
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<tr>
<td>Navy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Air Force</td>
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<tr>
<td>Office of the Secretary of Defense</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Treasury</td>
<td>General Services Administration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Veterans Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>Agency for International Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Environmental Protection Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health and Human Services</td>
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<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Labor</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>National Aeronautics and Space Administration</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Congress / Legislative Branch</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marine Corps</td>
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<tr>
<td>Homeland Security</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Energy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Services Administration</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Agency for International Development</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Government Accountability Office</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Security Administration</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Departments / agencies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentage of respondents, n=140

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.
A majority of State/Local respondents are senior decision-makers

### What best describes your role within your organization?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C-suite/executive level</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VP/senior level</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-level</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entry/junior level</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### What best describes your employment situation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Situation</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>State government</td>
<td>22.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal government (e.g., incorporated cities, towns, villages, etc.)</td>
<td>42.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County or county equivalent (e.g., consolidated city-county) government</td>
<td>20.94%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Township government</td>
<td>4.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent special district government (e.g., utility, fire, police, transit, etc.)</td>
<td>2.99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent school district government</td>
<td>0.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5.98%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.
About

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**Government Business Council**

Government Business Council (GBC), the research arm of Government Executive Media Group, is dedicated to advancing the business of government through analysis and insight. GBC partners with industry to share best practices with top government decision makers, understanding the deep value inherent in industry’s experience engaging and supporting federal agencies.

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**Contact**

Daniel Thomas  
**Director, Research & Content Services**  
Government Executive Media Group  
Tel: 202.266.7905  
Email: dthomas@govexec.com

govexec.com/insights  
@GovExecInsights

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—

**Contact**

Roberta J. Mourão  
**Principal**  
EY, Government & Public Sector  
Tel: 703.747.0865  
Email: Roberta.mourao@ey.com

John Geiran  
**Managing Director**  
EY, Government & Public Sector  
Tel: 202.243.8598  
Email: John.geiran@ey.com