Remote Work in Healthcare and Academic IT Leadership: A Permanent Shift

A WittKieffer Survey Report
Remote Work in Healthcare and Academic IT Leadership: A Permanent Shift

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One of the most significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of healthcare and academic Information Technology professionals was the nearly wholesale transition to a full or partial work-from-home arrangement. In our discussions with the IT executives Wittkieffer engages with, as part of our daily work, we have learned that most individuals embrace the flexibility and freedom that remote and hybrid work situations bring. Many feel they are just as, or even more, productive than they had been before.

This work-from-home trend, of course, reflects changes seen across industries. It is a situation not all workers have: according to Pew Research, just four in 10 adults are able to conduct their work remotely. Those who can work from home – most IT workers included – indicate that they prefer to do so and hope not to change back to old office-based work scenarios. According to some studies, the trend toward home-based working will continue to increase even after the pandemic is in the rear-view mirror.

Now that COVID-19 is on the wane, we wanted to collect and analyze our own data to understand whether the work-from-home trend for IT executives was truly permanent. Have CIOs, CTOs and other leaders irrevocably changed the way they work, or will they begin to revert back to a mostly in-office routine now that offices have reopened and resumed their activity? Are we truly experiencing a new normal in the way that IT leaders work? If so, what are the implications for their careers, their teams and the way that organizations recruit these executives?

To find out, WittKieffer contacted thousands of IT leaders in healthcare and higher education to gather quantitative and qualitative data about changes in their work habits. In total, 202 leaders responded, providing a wealth of data about their past and current work arrangements. We detail in this report the essentials of their responses.
Evaluating the data and feedback we received as a whole, a few tangible takeaways stand out:

1. **Organizations looking to hire IT leaders will need to accommodate these executives' desire for remote work or lose top candidates.** Remote and hybrid work arrangements allow organizations to cast a much wider net when recruiting new IT executives. That said, IT leaders and professionals currently have the upper hand in the recruiting dynamic, and most of them will insist upon remote/hybrid working conditions if they are to accept employment with a new organization.

2. **The pandemic has irrevocably changed IT leaders' work arrangements and their expectations for what they'll accept in the future.** While some executives – more so in higher education than in healthcare – will transition back into an office-only work style, most see the obvious benefits of home and flex schedules, for themselves and their teams.

3. **IT leaders struggle to manage personal issues such as work-life balance and productivity from home.** For every IT executive who told us that home and hybrid arrangements were a godsend, nearly as many indicated that they wrestled with the freedom and flexibility provided. For many leaders, work-life balance has suffered.

4. **Leaders are challenged to build team culture and camaraderie with remote workforces.** Most IT executives suggest that team spirit has been compromised by remote working.

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"Offering remote work to job candidates allows us to recruit across all 50 states. We've never had this kind of access to talent."

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Takeaways: What We Have Learned

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In all, 202 executives responded to our survey, about 70% of which represented hospitals, health systems, for-profit healthcare companies, and payers. Responses were anonymous in order to gather the most genuine feedback.

### Respondent Titles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chief Information Officer</td>
<td>58.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Health Information Officer/Chief Medical Informatics Officer</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Technology Officer</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Information Security Officer</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Digital Officer</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Nursing Informatics Officer</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Applications Officer</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Analytics Officer</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Respondent Organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare provider or payer</td>
<td>69.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or university</td>
<td>30.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data: A Sudden Shift

The global pandemic saw offices closing and IT leaders and their teams scrambling to maintain their responsibilities while transitioning to remote and hybrid work routines. The following charts document the dramatic shift that took place. Whereas four out of every five IT leaders worked in-office prior to the pandemic, just one in four does now.

Which of the following best describes your current work arrangement?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Healthcare</th>
<th>Higher Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I work in the office every day.</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a hybrid arrangement.</td>
<td>55.4%</td>
<td>56.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I work remotely every day.</td>
<td>20.3%</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Healthcare vs. Higher Education

Clearly, healthcare IT leaders have more flexibility than their counterparts at colleges and universities. Just one in five healthcare IT executives currently works in the office daily, whereas one in three higher education leaders does.

Which of the following describes your work arrangement prior to COVID-19?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Healthcare</th>
<th>Higher Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I worked in the office every day.</td>
<td>82.2%</td>
<td>79.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had a hybrid arrangement.</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I worked remotely every day.</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Blessing and Curse

Do the leaders we surveyed actually like this new scenario? Opinions were decidedly mixed. "It's been a blessing and a curse," one leader responded. "I am much more productive because I am not stuck in a car two hours every day. On the other hand, I'm spending those extra hours that I'm not driving working."

The benefits of remote and hybrid work arrangements were many, survey respondents told us. Among them:

» **Better Work-Life Balance**: While some IT leaders feel like they are "always on" while working from home, the majority noted that work-from-home and hybrid arrangements allow them to spend more time with family, exercise, take up hobbies and simply relax.

» **Happier Staffs**: "There is such great flexibility for our employees to spend time with their families as well as work," one leader noted. "I've noticed better morale and work appears to be accomplished at the same or a better rate."

» **Increased Productivity (and Cost Savings)**: "I get much more done than I ever have," one participant said. "Plus, I save money on gas, tolls, dry cleaning and dog sitters."

» **Recruiting Advantages**: Offering remote work to job candidates "allows us to recruit across all 50 states," one survey taker said. "We've never had this kind of access to talent."

Wishing for a Water Cooler

IT executives we surveyed were in consensus about the drawbacks of remote and hybrid teams. With little or no face-to-face interactions, there are no or few opportunities for the incidental, fun and fulfilling bonding experiences that happen when colleagues meet in person. There is a yearning for the "water cooler" experiences that happen in office settings.

Some of the other drawbacks we learned of:

» **Lack of Connection**: It's much harder for teams to stay connected and engaged with each other. (See "Rules of Engagement" further below.)

» **Lost Productivity**: This is the subject of debate, as many of the responses we received note that their staff are actually more productive working from home. Nonetheless, leaders lamented that the sparks that happen when people get together in an office are all but gone. "No face time with my teams means no meaningful connections are formed," one individual said. "Everything is business."

» **Longer Hours and Burnout**: "Work never goes away and never ends," said one IT leader. "Zoom fatigue" is a real phenomenon and many survey respondents lamented the fact that work-from-home means no change in scenery.

» **Recruiting Challenges**: Now that IT staff can work remotely, they can be recruited from almost anywhere. This increases the pool of candidates to select from, but it also means that IT teams are competing for talent against other organizations well outside their vicinities. This competition has increased exponentially.
Data: What the Future Holds

What will happen in the coming years as the pandemic passes and IT leaders have three options (home, hybrid, or office) to consider for their work routines? For the most part, the current new normal will remain intact. Four out of five IT leaders will keep their current work scenario. In addition, they will prioritize flexibility in their expectations for their teams. Less than 3% of leaders will require their staffs to show up in the office each day.

The following feedback from one IT leader exemplifies the current trend toward flexibility: "We have demonstrated that we can be just as productive (if not more) in a largely remote environment, eliminating commute hours and enabling fast collaboration between dispersed team members. It has also allowed team members to better balance work and personal activities. Without commutes, we can now have meals at home with the family and the; work-from-anywhere; model allows much more flexibility. Remote positions also expand our recruitment pipeline which increases the talent pool."

Healthcare vs. Higher Education

More than half (53.4%) of IT leaders in higher education noted that they are flexible in regard to their teams’ work arrangements. This is greater than that in healthcare (34.7%) and suggests perhaps a recognition of the need in academia to accommodate workers’ wishes in order to recruit and retain them. While less flexible, higher percentages of healthcare IT leaders, however, expect their workers to be either remote or hybrid.
As IT teams have gone increasingly remote on a full-time or hybrid basis, their leaders have had to get creative in keeping their employees engaged with their work and with each other. This includes near constant communications and check-ins with all team members—it's safe to say that there's no such thing as over-communication. "Culture growth must be intentional rather than transactional," one survey participant stated.

"I meet [virtually] with directors one-on-one every week," said one IT leader. "I also meet with the directors and managers as a group once per week and also with the entire IT team twice a week." This sounds like a lot of meetings, this executive admits. However, "these touch points keep everyone working as my team, the team, and our team."

Besides prioritizing video chats and check-ins, leaders have been trying other tactics to keep teams engaged:

» Coordination of occasional "in office" days
» An emphasis on collaboration tools such as Microsoft Teams
» Game days, trivia contests and Wordle competitions
» Coffee gift cards and virtual coffee chats
» Virtual happy hours
» Small monthly gifts to all team members
» A newsletter or regular team email
» Regular team town halls
» Quarterly team lunches at a designated location (for those able to attend)
» Group volunteer opportunities

Granted, not all of these activities will always be successful, and can even backfire. "Please don't make me put on these fake after-hours virtual events," one IT leader said. "They are awkward and do nothing for actual team building and just make me feel like I am still at work." And encouraging in-person events (such as occasional team lunches) may alienate those IT staff who are truly too far away to travel to a central location.

Nonetheless, it seems that leaders who are very intentional about building team camaraderie experience success at it. "I now do a lot of 15-minute check-ins with all staff to see how they are doing," another executive noted. "It helps them feel more connected to the top and we can have conversations that were not happening pre-pandemic."
What impact does the new normal of home and hybrid working have on IT executives' career aspirations? It is quite clear that most executives will only consider a new position if it allows them the option of flexibility or is at least negotiable.

To keep things in perspective, however, the "opportunity to work remotely" is not at the top of the priority list for those pursuing a new position. The leadership team and compensation are more significant factors that come into play when assessing a career change.

We are experiencing a new normal in the IT workplace. Executives are not only demanding that they be given the flexibility to work from home fully or part-time, but also expect it for their teams. Surely, some IT leaders and teams will continue to return to the office and revert to prior workplace routines, but they represent the minority. For most IT leaders and professionals, the new normal is here, and it is here to stay.

Thank you for your interest in this WittKieffer survey report. Please contact Hillary Ross, Practice Leader, Information Technology, or Nicholas Giannas, Principal, to learn more about this study. They can be reached at hross@wittkieffer.com or ngiannas@wittkieffer.com.
WittKieffer is a leading global executive search and advisory firm dedicated to improving quality of life through impactful leadership. For more than 50 years, the firm has operated exclusively at the intersection of for-profit and not-for-profit healthcare delivery, science, and education—the “Quality of Life” ecosystem. Through its DEI, Interim Leadership, Board Services and Leadership Advisory solutions, WittKieffer helps build and enhance leadership teams that transform organizations and communities. WittKieffer combines the agility and personalized service of a boutique firm with global scale to deliver exceptional outcomes.

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