Post Pandemic Task Force Report
**Charge**
The Post Pandemic Task Force will provide specific recommendations for the creation of actional guidelines, procedures, and organizational supports to enhance the well-being of NDSU Extension professionals and NDSU Extension overall. These recommendations will reflect the positive outcomes of the Covid pandemic on the ways:

- our organization conducts business going forward while maintaining high quality, relationship building work;
- our organization supports our personnel while considering the accountability needed for a fair and consistent system.

**Co-Chairs**
- Carrie Johnson, Interim Assistant Director, Family & Community Wellness Program Leader
- Greg Benz, Agriculture and Natural Resources Agent, Dunn County

**Members**
- Adrian Biewer, 4-H Youth Development Specialist
- Megan Ditterick, Specialist and Director, EFNEP and Family Nutrition Program
- Aaron Field, Program Coordinator, Soil and Water Leadership Development
- Jane Hayen, Administrative Assistant, Cavalier County
- Kari Helgoe, Family and Community Wellness Agent, Pembina County
- Nikki Johnson, Community Health and Nutrition Specialist
- David Kramer, Precision Agriculture Specialist
- Devan Leo, Agriculture and Natural Resources Agent, McKenzie County
- Mark Miller, Agriculture and Natural Resources Agent, Rolette County
- Lynnette Vachal, 4-H Youth Development Agent, Mountrail County
- Jacey Wanner, Parent Educator, Parent and Family Resource Center

*Submitted to NDSU Extension Leadership on April 30, 2021.*
Task Force Recommendation Highlights

The Post Pandemic Task Force began meeting in February 2021 to start the important task they were charged with completing. Regular meetings were held to discuss various issues facing NDSU Extension. Informal data gathering was conducted by members at various times. The Task Force also reviewed external resources which included information from other universities and organizations, research available, and other written material. The Task Force determined that conducting an organization-wide survey to gather more data would be beneficial in formulating the final recommendations.

The Post Pandemic Survey was drafted and all Task Force members were able to provide input as to questions that would be asked and the wording of those questions. Qualtrics was used to administer the survey. It was sent to all NDSU Extension employees on March 26, 2021, including county support staff, which are fully funded by counties. The Task Force then analyzed the survey results.

The Task Force has developed actional guidelines for how NDSU Extension should adapt as we move forward. These guidelines are highlighted in this section of the report.
Internal Operations

• Flexible work should continue to be allowed, while Extension offices (state and county) remain open and accessible to the public.
• Allow continued remote work, while continuing to be accessible to the public.
  o Supervisors, following NDSU Telecommuting/Remote Worksites Guidelines, should work with staff to determine if their position is appropriate for remote work. If the staff is located in a county office, the County Commission should also be consulted.
  o While it may not be possible for an employee to work remotely full-time, allow one day per week to be done remotely as long as the office can remain open to the public.
    ▪ Proper office coverage is essential and being able to contact staff is vital for office operations. Work with support staff and colleagues in office space to make sure office is open during normal business hours.
    ▪ Staff must be transparent with their schedules and let others know how to reach them.
  o If productivity begins to decline, the supervisor can revoke the remote work option for that employee.
• Promote staff accountability by using methods that allow for more transparency.
  o Keep Outlook Calendar updated.
  o Keep colleagues and supervisor updated as to your work location.
  o Staff should update PEARS on at least a monthly basis to track program activities.
• Assume positive intent
  o Trust staff are working when they use flexible work schedules and remote work opportunities.
    ▪ Remote work is not a day off and trust should be given to staff choosing this option unless proven otherwise.
• Promote employee health/wellness and work-life balance.
  o Supervisors encourage staff to use leave and compensation time.
  o If there is only one person in an office, allow for that office to close over lunch to provide for a break.
  o Foster a culture where we support those who tell us “no.” If there is new interest in a program, it may be time to sunset another.
  o Don’t expect everyone to attend every meeting.
  o Technology free time is also needed.
  o Supervisors should avoid sending emails outside of business hours and make it a point that messages that are sent do not need a reply until the next business day.
  o Staff should regularly block out chunks of time on their calendar to do in-depth work on projects and have at least two “Zoom free” days per month.
  o For the health of everyone in your location, do not go to the office when you are not feeling well.
  o Apply consistent DD/ELT/Administration standards/guidelines across the state.
Conducting Business

- Virtual, hybrid and face-to-face programs should continue to be offered.
  - When determining how to deliver educational programs, the following things should be considered:
    - Content being delivered.
    - Audience of the program.
    - Preference of the audience.
    - Availability of the educator.

- Continue to use technology.
  - Utilize online meetings (Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc.) to reduce travel time, but also allow for in-person meetings as desired.
  - Shorten online meeting times by 5-10 minutes, for example meetings that typically would take an hour can be shortened to 50 minutes. Take into account time zones when scheduling meetings.
  - Determine which technologies will be used and supported by the organization. For example, Microsoft Teams should be used by program planning teams to collaboratively work on projects.
  - Being intentional about emails being sent to staff so individuals aren’t as overwhelmed by the number of emails they receive.
  - Listservs should be used sparingly and reserved for communication that must reach every person on the listserv.
  - Continue professional development activities to support learning of new technologies.
  - If working remotely and visibly not in an office space, use virtual background or screen.

- All offices should remain open to the public during normal business hours. However, in occasional rare instances, offices can be closed if all staff are unavailable.
  - Staff in each office space/suite should coordinate schedules to make sure the office will remain open to the public.

- Even if staff is working remotely they should be able to be contacted and receive a timely response (i.e., forwarding office phone to a personal phone, sending voicemail to email, adding mobile phone number to email signature, etc). If you are on vacation, this is not necessary, only for times when you are working elsewhere.
Task Force Recommendations

The Task Force has determined five areas that needed to be addressed as we move forward. These areas are: flexibility; telecommuting/remote work; accountability/trust; employee health/wellness; and effective use of technology. Discussions for each are located in this section.

**Flexibility**
Flexible work arrangements have been used by Extension professionals for some time, due to the nature of our work. Results of the quantitative and qualitative survey summaries have indicated that increased flexibility during the Covid pandemic was considered beneficial. Survey respondents felt strongly that increased remote work contributed to “More flexibility about when I work” with an average score of 75.77.

Flexible work schedules should continue to be allowed. An option of a flexible schedule would benefit parents with childcare, aging parent issues, or other personal circumstances that require a flexible schedule. These policies would then aid in enhancing the work/life balance. Consider that employees who have flexibility in workplace can have a positive impact on employee accountability and trust.

When determining a flexible schedule, the immediate supervisor must be included on the conversation. The flexible work should not impact the overall work being completed by the employee. An office must remain open to the public during “normal business hours.” This could be accomplished by staggering start/end times with those located in a physical location.

The Task Force recommends updating the current Flex Time and Personal Sustainability Guidelines for Agents and Parent Educators ([https://www.ndsu.edu/fileadmin/vpag/FlexTimePersonalSustainability.pdf](https://www.ndsu.edu/fileadmin/vpag/FlexTimePersonalSustainability.pdf)). These guidelines should be amended to include other salaried Extension professionals. They should also be reviewed on a regular basis.

**Telecommuting/Remote Work**
The Covid-19 pandemic forced a quick transition to remote work for workers around the globe, including 71% of NDSU Extension employees who responded to our survey. This
transition created some challenges, but also revealed benefits of remote work to employee well-being and productivity. Given the results from the survey, it is clear that Extension staff found these remote options to be beneficial, and at least some level of remote work would contribute to their overall well-being and effectiveness in their positions. It is clear that these options be considered when moving forward with post-Covid policies regarding remote work.

In response to the question “How beneficial do you find each of the following in regard to working remotely?” average scores ranged from approximately 74 to 81 out of a possible 100 points. Overall, survey respondents indicated a strong preference for the “Ability to work from any location” with an average score of 81. Moreover, remote work allowed for “Working independently” with a score of 73.92. These results, coupled with high scores for “Better work-life balance” (69.40), and the “Ability to work more efficiently” (67.72) suggest that remote work during the pandemic had an overall positive impact on NDSU Extension staff. Of the respondents, an overwhelming majority were classified as “Agent/Educator/Assistant” (N=64), “Specialist” (N=36), “County Support Staff” (N=26) and “State Support Staff” (N=23). From a negative standpoint, survey respondents indicated that the most difficult aspect of remote work was “Better collaboration within the organization” with an average score of 52.38. Given the range of 100, this could be interpreted as no noticeable change overall.

In response to “How difficult did you find each of the following while working remotely,” the largest issue faced by Extension staff was “Teaching Programs” with an average score of 83.13 out of 100. This was followed by “Having the supplies or files needed,” with an average score of 36.8 out of 100, and “Having the office equipment I prefer” with an average score of 33.59.

Out of those who responded to the question “Which of the following work formats do you feel would maximize your overall well-being?” only 12.82% of survey respondents indicated that “Fully in-person” was the best option. However, 42.31% indicated that “Mostly in-person with occasional remote work” was the best option. Those two formats represent a total of 55.13% that felt either fully in-person or mostly in-person were the best options. Of the survey respondents that were more in favor of remote work, 21.79% indicated that an even split was the best option, 20.51% indicated that mostly remote was the best option, and
2.56% indicated that fully remote was the best option. These results combined indicate that 44.86% felt that a minimum of equal in-person and remote was the best option. Overall, 87.17% felt that “some” level of remote work would maximize their overall well-being. One interesting thing to note is that there was an inverse response between county and state support staff regarding remote work. County support staff indicated that mostly in-person with occasional remote work would maximize their overall well-being, and only 4.35% of state support staff indicated the same.

In response to “Which of the following work formats would maximize your effectiveness as an Extension professional?”, 46.79% indicated that “Mostly in-person with occasional remote work would be the best option and 16.03% indicated that fully in-person would be the best option. This represents a total of 62.82% indicating that either fully in-person or fully in-person with occasional remote work would maximize their effectiveness. A total of 37.17% felt that a minimum of equal in-person and equal remote would best maximize their effectiveness. If combined with those that felt “occasional” remote work would maximize their effectiveness we find that a total of 83.96% of survey respondents felt that at least some level of remote work would be beneficial.

While telecommuting/remote work is a noted benefit, Extension professionals must also be accountable and accessible to the public. If an NDSU Extension employee wishes to work remotely, it must be approved by their immediate supervisor in accordance with the current NDSU Telecommuting/Remote Worksite Policy (https://www.ndsu.edu/hr/managers_toolbox/telecommuting/). It is important for employees to remember, that a remote worksite is their choice and not a requirement. The organization will not pay for items such as furniture, Internet, phone, etc.

The supervisor should consider allowing expanded remote work approval based on employee job duties, employee accountability, employee preference, and stakeholder needs. If the employee is located in a county office, the County Commission should also be consulted when deciding if a position can be done remotely.

While it may not be possible for an employee to work remotely, the Post Pandemic Task Force recommends that those wishing to work remotely are able to do so a minimum of one day a week while still ensuring that an office remain open to the public at a given location. When circumstances such as conferences, workshops, or other events allow for an employee
to work remotely, remote work should be considered. This has the effect of allowing the employee to focus on the conference or workshop proceedings, while still in a position to accomplish their respective work responsibilities.

Supervisors should assume positive intent when employees request remote work approval. However, if an employee’s productivity begins to decline, the supervisor can revoke the remote work option for that employee.

Relevant training and professional development opportunities should continue to be offered for both remote work and technology. Provide access to workshops or videos to promote positive remote work experiences, which would promote positive accountability and trust. List upcoming training opportunities for technology training for remote work employees.

**Accountability/Trust**

Employee accountability is the ability of an employee to fulfill obligations and expectations according to their job description. In the remote work survey, participants responded to questions regarding accountability with comments focused on a unified guidance and coordination with remote work expectations and an ability to track and hold employees to NDSU expectation standards.

Results of the quantitative and qualitative survey summaries indicated that over 65% of respondents who supervised staff felt the effectiveness of working remotely was at least somewhat effective to extremely effective. Respondents also indicated the need to have a unified and coordinated guidance that covers accountability for staff working remotely.

Of those responding to the survey question, “which was to rate the effectiveness of supervision staff while they were working remotely,” a combined 69.85% felt that they were somewhat to extremely effective supervising staff remotely. Only 2 or 3.17% felt supervising staff remotely was not effective. There were 26.98% who indicated that their staff had not worked remotely during the pandemic. Breaking this down further, 65.8% of the Agriculture and Natural Resources program said they were at least somewhat effective, 66.67% of Family and Community Wellness were at least somewhat effective, and 100% 4-H and Youth Development respondents felt they were at least somewhat effective.
Respondents to the survey question on the effectiveness of their staff while they were working remotely had an overall 70.97% who felt their staff were at least somewhat effective while working remotely. A combined 41.94% responded that they felt their staff were either very effective or extremely effective while working remotely. Only 1.61% stated that their staff were not effective and 27.42% indicated that their staff did not work remotely.

The follow-up survey question asked how comfortable they would be allowing staff to continue working remotely. Overall, 68.26% indicated they were at least somewhat comfortable, with 36.51% of those indicating they were very comfortable to extremely comfortable. There were 9.52% of respondents that indicated they were not comfortable allowing staff to continue to work remotely.

Proper office coverage is essential and contacting staff by the public, staff, and organization is vital for office operations. In the qualitative survey response, some survey participants wrote about being frustrated not knowing how to contact people within NDSU Extension when they were working remotely and having difficulty contacting them via phone and having a lack of response via email. There must be a way to contact staff working remotely by telephone. The Task Force recommends office phones be forwarded to a personal phone or adding mobile phone numbers to the signature of their email. Make sure contact information is available and others know how to contact you and respond to messages in an appropriate amount of time.

Promote staff accountability by utilizing methods that allow more transparency within the organization. Keep Outlook Calendar updated, current and public for activities and locations where you are working or if you are on vacation/sick.

NDSU Extension uses Program Evaluation and Reporting System (PEARS) to track program activities across the state. The Task Force would encourage more frequent entry into PEARS so supervisors can easily access program activities. It is a suggestion that entries be made at least on a monthly basis.

Work accountability is vital to any organization’s productivity and success. Duties and updated job descriptions should be available for every NDSU Extension employee so there are clear expectations. Supervisors should refer to pages 41-46 of the NDSU Supervising in a Higher Education Environment brochure (https://www.ndsu.edu/fileadmin/hr/Supervisor_Information_Brochure.pdf).
Trust colleagues are working even if not in the office, assume positive intent and productivity. While one employee may be more productive in a traditional office setting, another may be more productive working remotely. The same goes for flexible schedules, some staff are more productive in the early morning while others are more productive late at night.

It is apparent that consistent messaging from Extension administration be more intentional moving forward. Having standard guidelines and policies set are needed because employees do talk to one another and it adds to the discontent and conflict when it seems things are not viewed as fair.

**Employee Health/Wellness**
The balance of professional and personal life is essential to the health and well-being of staff in the organization. Along with flexible scheduling and remote work options, the Task Force has developed some guidelines to ensure positive healthy outcomes. Staff should also be encouraged to take their annual leave, and sick leave when not feeling well. Not only is it important for a person’s health to stay home if they are not feeling well, but it is a health and safety issue for those around them.

If a staff member is on leave, they should not schedule work activities during this time. It should not be required for staff to include work emails on their personal cellular device if they do not want it. Supervisors should model this behavior as well. In addition, supervisors should avoid sending emails to staff outside of normal business hours.

While the Task Force recommends offices remain open to the public, we also understand that in some circumstances there may only be one staff member at a location on a given day. If there is only one person in the office, it is recommended that the office be allowed to close over lunch to accommodate for that staff member to receive their lunch break. It is also important to remember that support staff are hourly employees and we can not expect them to work more than 40 hours per week.

In the next section, effective use of technology will be discussed. However, we must also realize that there is also technology overload from time to time. The Task Force asks that staff set aside technology free time for themselves. They should also block out chunks of time
on their calendar to do in-depth work on projects and have at least two “Zoom free” days per month.

The Task Force acknowledges that there are many meetings for staff to attend throughout the work week. It should not be expected for staff to attend every meeting. If the content does not pertain to certain staff, excuse them from mandatory attendance (i.e. if discussing programming needs, excuse support staff). It is suggested that online meetings end a few minutes early to give people time for a break for those instances when there are back-to-back meetings. Also, consider the time zone in which meeting participants reside when scheduling meetings.

Burnout is a real problem for Extension professionals. We tend to want to be everything to everyone and are asked to be involved in many different activities. To encourage better health and well-being of staff, NDSU Extension should foster a culture where we support colleagues who tell us “no.” It should also be encouraged that if a staff member adds a new responsibility or start a new project/program that they consider sunsetting another.

Support personal wellness opportunities offered to staff (i.e., stress management, meditation, humor, social/emotional health, work/life balance, conflict resolution, effective communication, etc.). It was noted that the Happy Hour format used during the pandemic was appreciated. The Task Force acknowledges that it is also important for staff to just have some down time to help rejuvenate and gain mental clarity.

**Effective Use of Technology**

Finally, the Task Force wanted to address the positive outcomes that technology provided to NDSU Extension during the pandemic. Technology made it possible for us to continue to do our important work. Moving forward, it will be important for how we interact with each other and with clients and stakeholders.

We acknowledge that technology should be an important component to our work as we go forward. However, not all situations are the same and the use of technology should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Virtual programming decisions should be based on what content is being delivered, the audience attending the program, preference of that audience, and availability of the educator. Online meetings save the organization time and money.
Extension should continue to use online meeting options, while allowing for some in-person meetings.

Technology will continue to be a major part in how NDSU Extension conducts business going forward. With so many options available to use for collaborating on projects at a distance from other team members, the number of available programs and applications can be overwhelming to staff. The Task Force recommends that there be a working group convened to determine which technology should be used consistently across the organization. Clearer guidance on what should be used in each type of situation would be appreciated. For example, when should Microsoft Teams be used versus Google Drive. These expectations should be posted and conveyed to all staff in Extension.

Technology is always adapting and changing. With that, we are expected to do the same. The Task Force acknowledges that keeping up with the latest technology is important and that staff (including county support staff) need to have trainings available to them. These trainings should be delivered in an understandable manner and appropriate format (may be virtual or in-person depending on the complexity of the topic). A process to request professional development training should be developed to determine the needs of staff across the state on an ongoing basis.