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Defense Acquisition Early Career Workforce Advisory Team Reflections on Working Virtual During COVID-19

When the United States declared a National Emergency in response to the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Pandemic on March 13, 2020, the declaration marked the start of an unplanned chapter of major change across the nation and for the entire Department of Defense (DoD) team, including the 181,000 members of the defense acquisition workforce, which includes us—the 38,000 Early Career Workforce professionals. As the story goes, homes turned into schools, offices, and day-care facilities—left parents in the acquisition workforce in quite the conundrum – “how will we execute our critical acquisition responsibilities, in partnership with industry, to keep the Warfighter in the fight, while ensuring that the next generation is at the kitchen table doing multiplication and division?!”.

DoD and Component direction was immediately provided to keep people safe and to ensure continuation of essential mission functions.

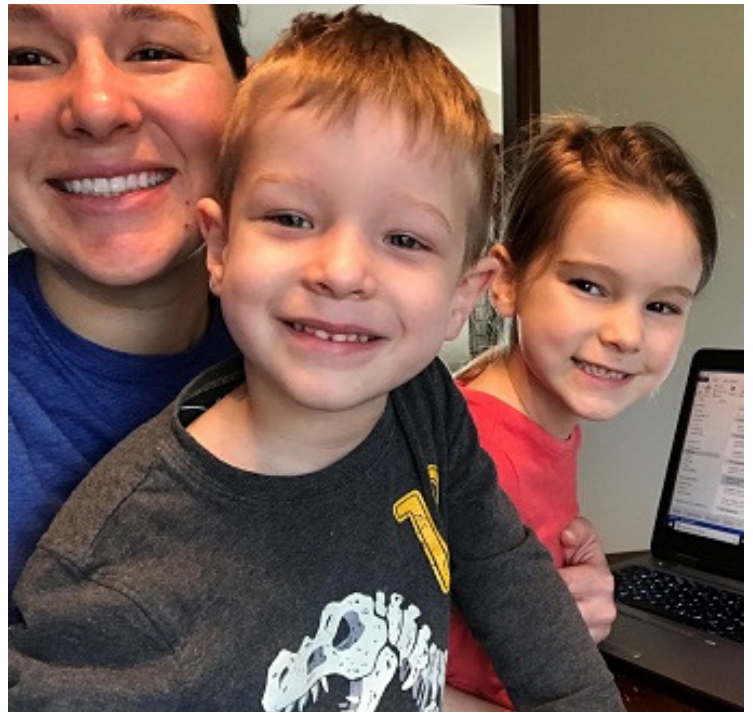
One ECW member, assigned to an Air Force organization, stated that his organization was proactive in anticipating the potential crisis and said this about how his organization reacted and adapted to the new environment:

“In Feb of 2020, our Chief made it mandatory to do telework five days a week as part of practicing telework, just in case we had to go into that mode. Long story short, our organization had established parameters for real world incidents early on making the transition to full telework fairly smooth. However, system overload did play a part in the early days of the COVID-19 lockdown, but thanks to the rapid response of local command SMEs [subject-matter experts] and HQ, impact on our mission was minimal...”



Caregivers faced additional challenges and were forced to find creative and innovative ways to meet mission readiness while still fulfilling family obligations. Many of our ECW members who are moms and dads have struggled with completing a typical 8 to 9-hour workday. However, based on feedback from our members, several have experienced a true maxiflex schedule, with organizations requiring only that the time be put in and the mission met. A mother of two said, “If I wasn’t able to be flexible with my work hours, I would never get anything done. I am able to support most meetings as long as they are scheduled in advance and keep to their allotted times.”

Another ECW member said, “It has definitely been a change, trying to juggle working from home, keeping our two small kids entertained and out of trouble, teaching preschool, and being a wife of a police officer (who hasn’t had a day off in over two weeks due to this crazy time). I have really learned the value of patience and understanding ... “ Through it all the positives outweigh the negatives, the experiences and resiliency during these times have increased productivity with flexibility, adaptation, and determination of an outstanding civilian workforce.



Throughout the pandemic new opportunities and the insurgence of best practices have presented themselves, that the DoD should strongly consider making a regular part of daily operations.

One ECW member stated:

”A best practice solution for organizations with low numbers of laptops and phones is software that is approved to be downloaded on an employee’s personal computer, which allows the user to access the workplace shared drives, files, SharePoint, and other sites that can only normally be accessed from a government computer. When used correctly, this system also prevents users’ personal computers from needing to be quarantined in the event of a security leakage over email.”

Best practices also included implementation of maxiflex schedules and recurring virtual engagements. Flexible Work Arrangements are now open to more civil servants, where previously none existed. Technologies that industry was already using became a way of “normal” business, and has given “the acquisition workforce a wealth of opportunities to explore technologies that promote collaboration at a distance.” Brown bag virtual lunches are even more common, allowing opportunity to discuss acquisition activities, issues within a workforce, or utilize the time as a teaching opportunity.

The new generation wants the opportunity to have a more balanced work life, more flexibility to work schedules, and the ability to excel without undue management pressures.

For more information about the Early Career Workshop, contact the HCI team at HClacqworkforce@hci.mil or visit <https://www.hci.mil/what-we-do/ecw.html>.