



The future of work is now

There is no doubt that the pandemic has had a profound impact on the workplace. Providing employees with flexible work options, work-life balance, and a culture of trust and communication are some of those impacts. Couple these with workplace challenges such as low unemployment, accelerated retirements, labor shortages, and intense competition for talent.

“The sum of all of these parts is this: The future of work is now,” said Bryan Garey, vice president for Human Resources, who has spoken in multiple professional public forums on the future workplace. “Because of the pandemic, the workplace has become vastly different. Employees have new expectations, and employers are working to meet those expectations while balancing the needs of their organizations.

“Virginia Tech is no different. Our Future of Work project is helping determine how best to incorporate new workplace expectations while continuing to support our academic and research missions and commitment to in-person instruction and learning experiences.”

While providing flexibility to employees, particularly administrative staff and faculty, is important, it is critical that new work models also support and complement in-person academic programs and student services. Faculty have continued to serve and engage students to help them advance toward degree completion as they also transition their courses and program activities, moved online due to the pandemic, back to their original in-person formats. In addition, with many roles still needed to work on-site for university operations to run smoothly, it is important to ensure we build an inclusive culture for all employees — whether they work on campus or remotely or a hybrid of both.

These and other guiding principles have driven Virginia Tech’s efforts as the university has explored new ways of working.

Piloting new ways of working: At the start of the fall 2021 semester, Human Resources launched a full-year Future of Work pilot that included participants from Advancement, the College of Engineering, Information Technology, the Office of the President, and Pamplin College of Business.

Each group approached the pilot differently to address specific challenges such as space issues, student needs, managing in hybrid environments, and more. The groups ensured buy-in from employees and leadership using forums, surveys, frequent

question-and-answer sessions, and cross-functional teams to make recommendations to leadership.

While the pilot groups vary greatly, they have experienced some common results such as:

- Increased employee engagement, productivity, and satisfaction.
- Improved ability to retain and recruit talent by providing flexible work options.
- Better space management in areas where space is at a premium.
- Improved service, particularly where some academic services are now available beyond traditional business hours and practices.

“Participating in the pilot gave our team the opportunity to be on the cutting edge of this important work,” said Patricia Wooten, human resources division director for Advancement. “We have implemented solutions like scheduling software to manage space and purchasing 360-degree cameras to use in meetings with an audience of in-person and online participants. Most importantly, we have learned to communicate better with one another. Leaders and teams are talking more about their needs, building trust, and working together toward solutions.”

“We couldn’t ignore new employee expectations for flexibility, and the college had growing space challenges,” said Ed Nelson, associate dean for administration and chief of staff for the College of Engineering. “By participating in the pilot, we have seen increased employee satisfaction; more flexibility for students who are now able to attend advising appointments virtually, which have increased as much as 150 percent; more available space for on-site employees; and improved retention and talent recruitment. We were recently able to retain two key employees who had to move out of the area by offering fully remote as a work option.”

“We’ve retained multiple employees due to the improved work-life balance and, in two cases, retained employees whose spouses relocated outside the area,” said Kay Hunnings, associate dean for administration for the Pamplin College of Business. “We’ve improved applicant pools by allowing telework and provided more flexibility for staff to work remotely during academic year breaks. Pamplin expects to continue this hybrid method of work into the future.”

Supporting new ways of working: The pilot groups’ work is invaluable to understand what flexible work options may or may not work for Virginia Tech. There isn’t one solution that works for every college or business unit but rather a combination of approaches that can be used to provide more flexibility in the workplace.

As leaders and employees continue to explore the possibilities, Human Resources has built a cache of resources, some of which have been available since the early days the pandemic. Support teams have built resources for training, communications, decision-making, policy, benefits, wellness, payroll, and more. Examples include:

- An updated application to document flexible work agreements. The application records agreements for fully remote, hybrid remote/on-site, and alternative schedules with review and approval of their unit and department heads.
- Telework suitability guidelines that help employees and leaders determine if a position can work a hybrid or fully remote work schedule.
- Training for supervisors and managers that provides guidance on how to lead in a new work environment where employees may be working both on-site and remotely.
- Pulse surveys that can be distributed to specific teams or units to gain employee feedback.
- Reviewed key university policies and made adaptations as needed to accommodate how employees were now working.
- Health and wellness resources for employees with a specific focus on mental health.
- Established a cross-functional team to make recommendations on out-of-state employment, which enables the university to expand recruitment efforts beyond Virginia.
- New reporting methods to understand university workforce trends.

“Human Resources’ vision is to provide innovative strategic, consultative, and administrative services in a collaborative manner,” said Marie Bliss, assistant vice president for Human Resources administration and leader of the Future of Work project. “This vision was put to the test during the pandemic as we faced challenges to support our employees and their ability to perform their work in an ever-changing environment. We developed a rainbow of solutions that inform, educate, and support our entire university.”

Is the future of work here to stay?: While it’s difficult to know what lies ahead, we have seen incremental and growing adoption of flexible work during the pandemic, including remote work and hybrid schedules, and the university has seen lower than expected turnover metrics in an era of tremendous workforce churn. Additionally:

- Nearly 40% of Virginia Tech’s population of A/P faculty and staff have documented flexible work agreements.
- The telework suitability guidelines continue to be a key resource for employees, managers, and leaders.
- HR’s Ready Resources site was consistently in the division’s top 10 sites for eight out of 12 months in 2021.
- VT has added additional states of employment beyond Virginia, including West Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, and Washington, D.C., and is continuing to research requirements for more states to add.

There has also been significant public interest in Virginia Tech’s future of work project. Virginia Tech has been tapped by other universities and professional organizations to provide expertise and insight.

“We have seen Virginia Tech move faster and further than almost any other higher education institution in the country in addressing workforce issues related to remote, hybrid, and flexible work,” said Scott Nostaja, senior vice president and national practice leader in organizational effectiveness at Segal, a long-time consultative partner to Virginia Tech.

“It is an honor to have other institutions of higher education contact us about our future of work efforts,” said Garey. “Ultimately, we are most honored and satisfied to be able to help our university’s leaders and employees develop new ways to enhance and improve our workplace today and in the long term, which will make Virginia Tech a stand out amongst employers.” Visit the article for links: <https://vtx.vt.edu/articles/2022/03/hr-future-of-work032022.html>

Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin to deliver 2022 University Commencement address

Gov. Glenn Youngkin will address Virginia Tech’s Class of 2022 during University Commencement exercises on Friday, May 13, continuing the tradition of inviting new Virginia governors to deliver the commencement address. The University Commencement ceremony will begin at 8:30 a.m. on May 13 in Lane Stadium. A complete schedule of commencement ceremonies and additional commencement information can be found on the commencement website at <http://www.vt.edu/commencement/>.

“We’re pleased Gov. Youngkin graciously accepted our invitation to speak to our graduating students,” said President Tim Sands. “His experiences in leadership and business give him a valuable perspective to share with Hokies who are preparing to begin an important new chapter in their lives.”

Since 1990, first-year Virginia governors L. Douglas Wilder, George F. Allen, James S. Gilmore III, Mark R. Warner, Timothy M. Kaine, Robert F. McDonnell, Terence “Terry” McAuliffe, and Ralph Northam have delivered the commencement address at VT.

Youngkin is a native of Virginia and has an engineering degree from Rice Univ. and an MBA from Harvard Business School. Before his inauguration as the 74th governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia in January, Youngkin worked at The Carlyle Group, where he spent 25 years. Youngkin and his wife, Suzanne, have four children.

The University Commencement ceremony will also include remarks from several of the Class of 2022 class officers. Female Member-at-Large Catharine Kelley will offer opening remarks. Danielle Panico, president of the class, will speak. Cadet Member-at-Large Austin Askew will provide closing remarks.