

# “The Stay-at-Home Federal Workforce” Hearing

15 JANUARY 2025

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Prepared for the Committee on Oversight and Reform

Chairman Comer, Ranking Member Connolly, and distinguished members of this Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit a statement for the record to support this hearing. As a workplace expert with over two decades of service in and out of uniform across the Intelligence Community, a variety of Federal Agencies and working for a fully remote company in private industry, I am honored to share the most pressing workplace trends and best practices from across sectors to create more efficient, productive, and accountable workplaces in government.

I addressed this committee on [the future of federal work](#) in December of 2021. At that time, we were navigating unprecedented changes in our work environments due to the Global Pandemic and trying to leverage the lessons learned for the benefits of future success across the Federal government.

Five years later we are still trying to figure out the best way ahead when it comes to when, where and how to create the most effective and productive work environments.

Before the pandemic, less than five percent of the U.S. workforce worked from home three or more days a week, with **office utilization between 50-60%**. At its peak, over 60% of employees were working from alternate worksites at least weekly.

According to Global Workplace Analytics research, while 56% of the U.S. workforce has jobs that can be done remotely, it has now **stabilized at 35-40%, with federal telework rates mirroring this trend.**

On average, **remote workers now work from home two to three days a week with federal telework rates mirroring this trend.** <sup>1,2</sup>

Last year, **telework saved taxpayers \$230 million** through reduced office space, commuter costs and lower operating costs according to the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) in the latest [Status of Telework in the Federal Government Report](#) to Congress in December 2024.

The OPM report also revealed the **lowest telework participation rate since fiscal year 2019** based on the government-wide push for more in-office work.

In contrast, the [2024 State and Local Workforce Survey](#) shows that 59% of state and local government counterparts work hybrid schedules and many work flexible work schedules, spending less than five days in the office.

Overall, 43% of Federal employees participated in some degree of telework, down from 46% the previous year. Of the 57% of employees eligible to telework at least part of the time, **only 7% were classified as fully remote.**

By leveraging expanded telework, remote work, and other flexibilities, we can tap into a broader talent pool, ensure continuity, and maintain our competitive edge. This approach is essential for sustaining a dynamic and resilient workforce, ready to meet the challenges of the future.

The Federal CIO Council's [Future of Work](#) plans highlight the **necessity of attracting, hiring, and retaining a geographically diverse talent pool** for mission-critical areas like IT, Cyber, and STEM.

This is especially urgent given that there are **19 times more retirement-eligible workers over 50 than those under 30 in Federal IT positions.**

To ensure the U.S. remains a global leader in innovation, the Vision 2030 Strategy by the [National Science Board](#) emphasizes **embracing geographic diversity** by strategically building scientific and engineering infrastructure in underserved areas.

## 2017 Federal IT Workforce by Age

Age	Workforce %
50-59	37.74%
40-49	27.87%
30-39	17.75%
60+	13.63%
20-29	3.01%

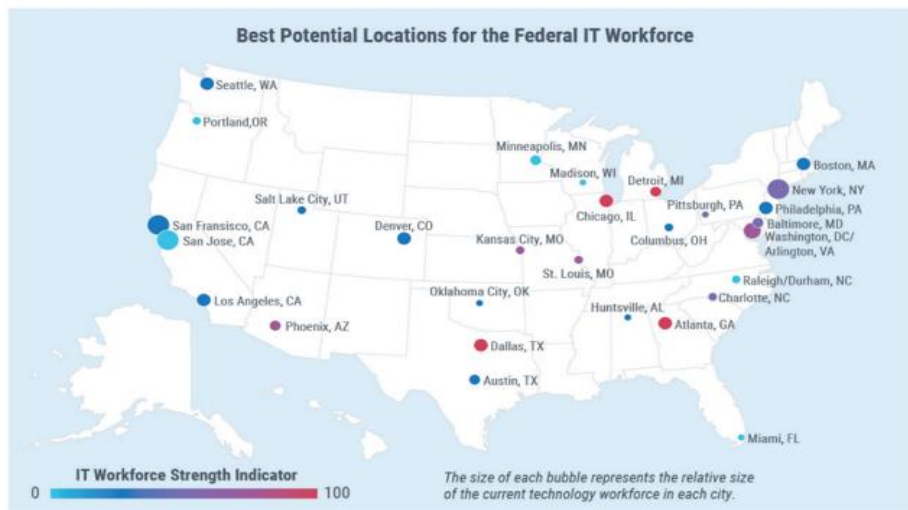


Figure CH3: Potential Locations for the Federal IT Workforce of the Future <sup>11,12</sup>

While [12% of the workforce is rural](#), [only 5% of the tech workforce is rural](#) according to the Center on Rural Innovation (CORI).

By increasing access to remote jobs, **we provide a pathway to include rural tech workers to participate in the federal workforce** to harness talent from across the nation, drive regional innovation, and foster economic growth --- further solidifying America's position at the forefront of scientific progress and federal services for our citizens.

## Enhancing National Security: Positive Impacts on Intelligence and Law Enforcement Agencies

At the height of the pandemic, components of the U.S. Intelligence Community swiftly transitioned their unclassified work to a flexible model, including telework for those who could safely and securely work remotely.

Today, the [U.S. Intelligence Community ranks in the Top 3 of 17 large Federal Agencies](#) and **leads as #1 among all large agencies for Work-Life Balance** on the [Best Places to Work in the Federal Government](#) list, published by the Partnership for Public Service. This underscores the critical importance of flexible work arrangements in boosting overall engagement and productivity.

Comparisons of engagement scores before and after the pandemic highlight the positive impact of these flexible policies. For instance, overall engagement scores in the Intelligence Community soared to **76.7% in 2020** during the height of the pandemic, when remote and other flexible work schedules were maximized, **compared to 69.9% in 2019** before the pandemic. Even with a shift to more in-person work, current engagement levels remain higher at 72.6% in 2023, demonstrating the lasting benefits of flexible work arrangements.

In a [November 2024 report by the Government Accountability Office](#) (GAO), the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) analyzed its 2023 Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey data.

The findings showed that **frequent teleworkers scored higher on performance dimensions like accountability and customer responsiveness compared to those who teleworked less frequently or not at all.**

The GAO report also found that **job applicants were three times more interested in remote work positions than in telework-eligible or in-office roles.** Inflexible work policies hinder recruitment and retention, especially for roles requiring high security clearances and specialized skills. This issue is critical for agencies struggling to fill mission-critical positions, particularly among [women and individuals with disabilities](#).

### Work-Life Balance

81

1 out of 15 large agencies

### Engagement & Satisfaction

Year	Rank	Score
2023	3 of 17	72.6
2022	3 of 17	71.9
2021	4 of 17	73.4
2020	2 of 17	76.9
2019	3 of 17	69.9
2018	5 of 17	66.3
2017	5 of 18	66.6

By enhancing and creating more efficiencies in flexible work policies, intelligence and law enforcement agencies can improve operational efficiency, recruitment, and retention.

**Promising Practices from U.S. Intelligence Agencies include:**

**Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI):**

- **Telework Policy:** Remote work has proven essential for maintaining operational efficiency and disaster preparedness. It allows agencies to continue their missions without interruption during crises.<sup>3</sup>
- **Flexible Work Options:** ODNI offers flexible work hours and telework options (to those in eligible positions), enabling all employees to choose schedules that enable them to do their best work - sometimes even allowing them to work evenings or weekends, which has been well-received by the workforce<sup>4</sup>.

**National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA):**

- **Hybrid Work Environment:** The NGA has embraced a hybrid work model, allowing employees to work both remotely and in-office. This flexibility has improved employee satisfaction and retention<sup>4</sup>.
- **Operational Efficiency:** By shifting more work to more flexible workdays and allowing suitable unclassified work to be performed remotely from unclassified spaces, NGA has maintained operational efficiency and continuity during the pandemic<sup>4</sup>. ([How NGA is handling hybrid telework - Defense One](#))

**Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC):**

**U.S. NRC HEART and Telework Policy Reports**

- **Hybrid Work Environment:** Conducted a thorough assessment of its policies and procedures to develop a "Presence with Purpose" model that includes connections and intentionality with accountability.
- **Operational Efficiency:** Developed a 4C Framework for Guiding In-Person, Meaningful Work (Connect, Collaborate, Create and Celebrate) and developed recommendations for strengthening outcomes and accountability through training, effective communication, technology, and space utilization.

**National Reconnaissance Office (NRO):**

- **Employee Retention:** NRO has seen positive outcomes in employee retention by offering hybrid work arrangements. Employees appreciate the balance of working both inside and outside of secure facilities<sup>4</sup>.
- **Adaptability:** The agency is exploring ways to expand telework options to meet employee preferences and operational needs<sup>4</sup>.

### **U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS):**

- **Attracting Talent:** USCIS found that telework-eligible positions attracted significantly more applicants than in-office positions from 2019 to 2023<sup>5</sup>.
- **Employee Engagement:** Increased telework has led to higher employee engagement and satisfaction, contributing to better overall performance<sup>5</sup>.

This data clearly illustrates that flexible work policies are essential for maintaining high levels of productivity and enforcing strict Return-to-Office (RTO) mandates will directly impact the operational efficiency of intelligence and law enforcement agencies.

### **National Security Implications and Military Readiness**

Military readiness is significantly affected by the employment challenges faced by military spouses and families, who often encounter high unemployment rates due to frequent relocations. These families rely on dual incomes to meet their financial needs, and the lack of job opportunities can lead to increased stress and dissatisfaction, impacting re-enlistment rates.

Recognizing this issue, the [National Defense Authorization Act \(NDAA\)](#) for Fiscal Year 2024 includes provisions to support remote work for military spouses.

This highlights the crucial role that remote work options play in maintaining military readiness. Additionally, the Act mandates a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report on federal agency telework, ensuring that remote work opportunities are accessible and effective for military spouses.

Reducing or eliminating telework options in the federal government would harm military readiness by removing employment prospects for military spouses, negatively affecting military families.

### **Key Considerations:**<sup>6.7</sup>

- **High Unemployment Rate:** Military spouse unemployment is around 21%, much higher than the national average, highlighting the need for flexible work options.
- **Impact on Readiness:** Financial strain from unemployment increases stress and dissatisfaction among military families, affecting re-enlistment rates. The 2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey found that 48% of active-duty families experience significant financial stress.
- **Dual-Income Necessity:** Many military families rely on dual incomes. Lack of job opportunities for spouses can lead to financial instability, impacting overall family well-being.

## Revitalizing Downtowns and Reversing the Brain Drain

Over the past 50 years, the U.S. has experienced significant shifts in where citizens choose to live, with skilled talent relocating to metropolitan areas with high concentrations of high-paid jobs, leading to brain drain.

Some states have thrived by retaining and attracting talent, while others have faced economic decline and loss of social capital. This impacts not only the economy but also the social and cultural fabric of communities.

Innovative programs like Tulsa Remote demonstrate that **attracting remote workers can revitalize local economies by increasing demand for housing, services, and amenities.**

**Tulsa Remote has generated \$563.6 million in direct employment income and \$330 million in new labor income<sup>8</sup>.**

States like Ohio, Maine, Iowa, and Alaska also offer relocation incentives, such as homeowner incentives, educational tax credits, and student loan debt forgiveness, to attract skilled and remote talent. Eastern Kentucky leveraged bringing remote employers and more remote jobs to offsite job losses from the coal-mining industry.

Encouraging programs to attract a skilled remote workforce and remote employers can support local businesses and prevent economic downturns in metropolitan areas. By leveraging, rather than abolishing, remote work, policymakers can address economic challenges and mitigate the negative impacts of brain drain, benefiting communities nationwide.

**Here are a few examples of best practices:**

**Tulsa Remote** (Tulsa, Oklahoma):

- **Participants:** Nearly 3,000 remote workers have moved to Tulsa since the program's inception- generating \$563.6 million in direct employment income and \$330 million in new labor income.
- **Impact:** Of those who plan to stay in Tulsa, 18% Own Businesses, over 4% have founded nonprofits and more than 11% joined local nonprofit boards.
- **Incentives:** Offers \$10,000 and a free coworking space to eligible remote workers.

**Greater ROC Remote** (Greater Rochester, New York):

- **Participants:** The program targets remote workers looking to relocate.

- **Impact:** Aims to attract talent to the region, thereby stimulating economic growth and community development.
- **Incentives:** Provides up to \$9,000 in homebuyer grants and a variety of relocation incentives.

### Move to Michigan (Southwest Michigan):

- **Participants:** Attracts remote workers nationwide.
- **Impact:** Designed to increase the local population and economic activity through home purchases and local spending.
- **Incentives:** Offers up to \$15,000 for remote workers who purchase or build a home with a cost of at least \$200,000.

## Bottom Line Impacts and Implications of RTO Mandates

A recent [KPMG survey of U.S. CEOs](#) from companies with revenues over \$500 million reveals a significant shift in expectations: **only one-third now anticipate a full return to the office within the next three years.**

This marks a dramatic change from last year, when 62% predicted the end of remote work by 2026 - in large part because enforcing rigid return-to-office (RTO) mandates can significantly **negatively impact performance, productivity, and profitability.**

Loss of Top Performers can hinder competitiveness and innovation and according to a [January 30, 2023 report by Gartner's HR practice](#), **high performers' intent to stay is 16% lower with strict RTO requirements, double the rate of average employees.** Among women and millennials, the intent to stay is 11% and 10% lower, respectively.

### Impact of Mandated Requirements on Employee Outcomes<sup>12</sup>

*Differences in employee outcomes between organizations that did versus not implement onsite mandated requirements.*

	Employee Performance	Discretionary Effort	Employee Engagement	Intent to Stay
Average Employee	—	● +3%	• +1%	● -8%
High-Performing Employees	—	—	—	● -16%
Gen Z Employees	—	—	● +5%	—
Millennial Employees	—	● +3%	● +2%	● -10%
Managers	—	● +3%	● +2%	● -8%
Women	—	● +2%	● +2%	● -11%

*Note: For most employees in this dataset, this RTO mandate meant working in the office five days a week. Others were required to work on-site two to three days per week. Gray dashes indicate there was not a statistically significant difference. Circle size varies according to the magnitude of the differences in employee outcomes (i.e., larger circles indicate larger differences). Source: Gartner (June 2023)*



In contrast, companies that embrace flexible work arrangements attract top talent, reduce turnover, and save on real estate costs. These savings can be reinvested to strengthen market position and drive growth.

## THE WAR ON TALENT

Work flexibility—both in location and schedules—remains a top priority for workers, according to LinkedIn’s [Global Talent Trends 2023 report](#). Job posts mentioning flexibility, well-being, or culture **receive nearly three times more views and over twice as many applications** compared to two years ago.

The Federal Government is also experiencing the benefits of remote work in recruitment and hiring. According to OPM in the [March 2023 Written Testimony](#), remote job postings on USAJobs.gov have had a significant impact:

- **17 times more applications** than non-remote jobs.
- An average of **25.2 applications from military spouse applicants**, compared to just 1.4 for non-remote jobs.
- Applications from candidates in **37 different states**, compared to **just 7 states for non-remote postings**.

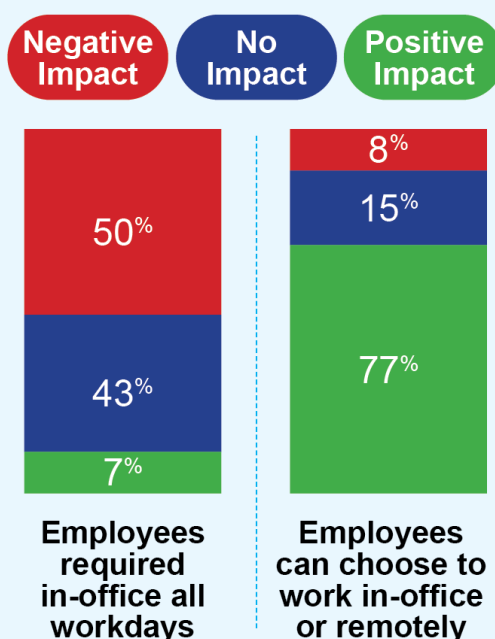
A balanced approach that combines meaningful in-person work with trust and flexibility delivers significant results for both businesses and government workplaces.

## PROFITABILITY

Enforcing strict return-to-office (RTO) mandates does not improve financial performance- challenging the assumption that physical office presence is inherently more productive. Recent data from the U.S. Department of Labor, [BLS Beyond the Numbers](#), found a **positive relationship between total factor productivity (TFP) and remote work**.

### Impact of In-Office vs. Flexible Work Policies on Recruiting

*Percentage of recruiting pros saying how their workplace policies impact recruiting efforts.*



[LinkedIn Global Talent Trends 2023 Report](#)

The BLS data shows that remote work can enhance productivity and reduce costs for businesses.

- **A 1% increase in remote work correlates with a 0.08% increase in TFP growth** from 2019 to 2021, and 0.09% from 2019 to 2022, both statistically significant.
- **Productivity increases with more remote work across 61 industries.**
- **TFP rises** as non-labor inputs like office space and utilities decrease, saving businesses costs.
- **Lower worker turnover** reduces the need for outside recruiting services.

[Research from the University of Pittsburgh](#) shows **no positive link between RTO mandates and improved financial performance.** Instead, strict **RTO mandates risk declining profitability** by shrinking the talent pool, especially when top performers leave for more flexible opportunities, hindering competitiveness.

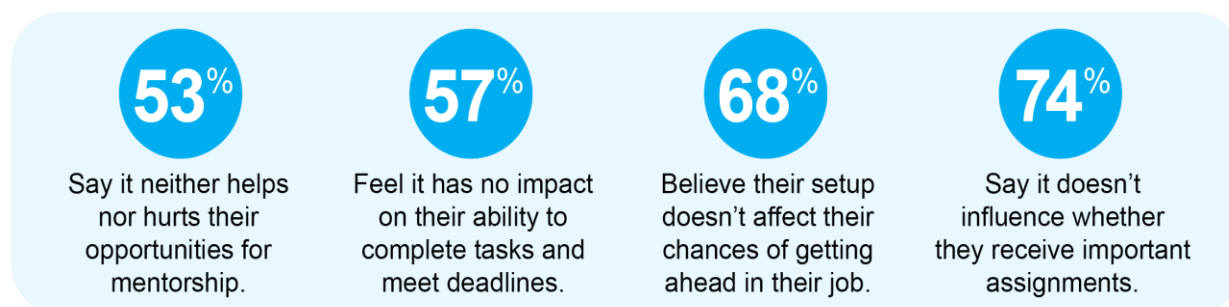
[Gartner](#) research indicates the benefits of return-to-office (RTO) mandates are modest at best. In contrast, flexible work drives better financial growth. Companies with flexible work policies outperform those with strict RTO mandates, which often lead to declining employee engagement and higher attrition rates, negatively impacting the bottom line.

In the context of a growing well-being crisis, diminishing trust between employees and employers, and an increasingly competitive talent market, it is essential to critically evaluate whether the advantages of RTO mandates outweigh the potential risks.

## Cultivating a Culture of Connection and Collaboration

According to [KPMG and Gallup](#), having a friend at work is a key driver of employee engagement, boosting productivity and job satisfaction.

[PEW Research Center](#) found that **telework does not harm workplace relationships. Remote workers are just as likely as office workers to have close friends at work and maintain strong relationships**, indicating that work location does not significantly impact workplace connections.



This evidence demonstrates that people can maintain strong workplace connections and high levels of engagement, supporting a productive and satisfied workforce in any location.

If policymakers and leaders are concerned about the impact of remote work on connection and collaboration, they could reallocate cost savings from remote workers living in lower-cost areas to fund periodic in-person activities that strengthen collaboration, mentoring, and building a high-performing culture.

Additionally, they could establish and improve federal satellite and coworking offices across the country, allowing remote federal workers to relocate to lower cost living areas, saving taxpayers millions of dollars each year<sup>9</sup>.

## **Enhancing Government Efficiency and Accountability**

In today's dynamic work environment, assessing productivity—whether in the office or remotely—is essential for achieving organizational goals.

For knowledge workers, since their output is driven by intellectual tasks, service and resource efficiency, **not physical presence**, organizations should prioritize the quality and efficiency of work, no matter where it is done.

Here are some specific tips to strengthen accountability and efficiency for all workers, regardless of whether working remote and telework, along with cost-saving methods to consider:

### **Focus on Output, Not Location:**

- Productivity should be measured by quality, output and impact, not physical presence. Key Metrics at the organizational, team and individual levels are necessary to track more regularly than once or twice per year.
- *Example:* Use performance metrics such as average processing times, backlog percentages, and customer service ratings to assess performance.

### **Training and Development:**

- Provide coaching, team training and resources for program managers to manage, monitor, and assess telework programs effectively.
- Equip managers and leaders with the right skills to lead, motivate and coach a modern, multigenerational workforce from any location.
- Offer tools and tips for workers to strengthen professional accountability, enhance performance and teach how to build connections and network across distance.

**Clear Performance Metrics:**

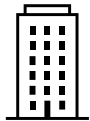
- Establish clear and transparent performance goals and metrics for all workers, regardless of location.
- Regularly review and adjust these metrics to ensure accountability and clarity.

**Empower Teams:**

- Use efficient software, productivity tools, and collaborative platforms to track work progress, manage tasks, and facilitate a blend of synchronous and asynchronous communication.
- Push flexible work policy decisions to the team levels and empower them with skills to create team agreements, norms, and accountability measures for better ways of working together.

**Support Organizational Health:**

- Foster a healthy organization with clear goals, strong leadership, and effective communication.
- Promote employee engagement and psychological safety to boost productivity.

**COST SAVINGS METHODS****Reduce Real Estate Expenses:**

- Allow remote federal workers to relocate to lower cost living areas, saving on locality pay, office space, commuter subsidies and utility expenses.
- [Example:](#) A small ICE office of 31 people- saved \$1 million annually by shifting to permanent remote work.

**Optimize Resource Allocation:**

- Establish and improve federal satellite and coworking offices across the country.
- Reallocate savings from reduced locality pay and transit subsidies to fund travel stipends for periodic in-person interactions.

**Fund Offsite, Team Training and Events for Meaningful In-Person Work:**

- Organize regular offsite events to strengthen culture and enhance skills across teams.
- Use cost savings to support regional economies and improve service delivery.

## What Won't Fix Productivity and Efficiency Issues

Return to office (RTO) mandates are unlikely to resolve productivity issues for knowledge workers due to the intangible nature of their work, the complexity of measuring productivity, and the importance of flexibility and psychological factors including.

### Computer Monitoring:[10.11](#)

Employee monitoring systems, intended to boost productivity, often backfire.

About **40% of U.S. professionals report feeling less productive when their work devices are monitored** and 43% say it affects company morale.

The real solution lies in creating a culture of accountability, trust, and flexibility.

Employees with clear performance goals, trust and job flexibility are more likely to stay with their organization for another year. When employees feel trusted and valued, they remain engaged and motivated, driving better results.

## Conclusion

In today's competitive talent market, offering flexibility is essential for productivity, competitiveness, and long-term success. It is not just a trend but a critical strategy for future-proofing our workforce.

By seizing this moment, we can outpace competitors and deliver unparalleled benefits nationwide, ensuring a brighter future for all. Communities, including and beyond Washington, DC, will gain from diverse talent and closer connections to citizens. A flexible, structured work model allows government organizations to thrive in today's dynamic job market, driving better results and long-term success.



### What if we don't?

We risk the loss of skilled workers, decreased productivity, negative impacts on the economy and lags in services to the citizens.

As Peter Drucker said, "**The best way to predict the future is to create it.**" [\(13 Photo Image\)](#)



## About Mika J. Cross

Mika J. Cross is a distinguished human capital expert, transformational workplace strategist and innovator.

Best known as a Government Workplace Expert, she is known on a national scale for implementing precedent-setting, federal government-wide human capital policy and workplace initiatives to implement work life and wellness policies within the United States Intelligence

Community, post 9/11, and she designed and implemented award winning work life programs across the Executive Departments and Executive Branches of government having served for more than two decades within the United States Intelligence Community, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Office of Personnel Management and the U.S. Department of Labor, among others. Additionally, she served as the Designated Federal Officer for the Secretary of Labor's Advisory Committee on Veterans Employment, Training, and Employer Outreach (ACVETEO) before transitioning to the private sector with FlexJobs, a fully remote company.

As Vice President of Employer Engagement and Strategic Initiatives, Mika collaborated with executives across all sectors and industries to enhance talent management, develop recruitment strategies, and leverage flexible work policies for attracting and retaining top talent.

Mika was a regularly featured guest on the ABC/7 [Government Matters TV](#) show and she regularly volunteers her time with the Senior Executives Association (SEA), the Maine Advisory Council on Remote Work and in the past with the Greater Washington Board of Trade Connected DMV Work Group, the Advanced Technology Academic Research Center (ATARC) Digital/Workforce Transformation Work Group, Board Appointed HR Liaison for AFFIRM, and she previously served as the Government Chair of the Evolving the Workforce Community of Interest for ACT-IAC.

In March 2023 she was invited by the Government Oversight Committee to contribute a Statement for the Record as part of their oversight hearing on the Nation's Largest Employer- OPM and in December 2021, she testified as an expert witness for the Senate Hearing on the Future of Federal Work.

Mika is a proud U.S. Army veteran, having served on Active Duty as both a commissioned officer and an enlisted soldier. She is a native of rural Maine and for much of her career, was a working single mother to two amazing Gen-Z children.

## Footnotes

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13. ([Source of the Caveman Photo Picture](#)) At CAASE, Jon Aldred, VP of Product Management at HBM Prensncia put a slide up on the screen during his presentation that summed up the notion for engineers. Two cavemen were dragging a heavy cart with square wheels past another who was offering innovative round wheels to them. The caption from the hard-working cavemen read: “No, thanks! We are too busy.” - [Don't Be Too Busy To Improve - Digital Engineering 24/7](#)