Bristol Bay Remote Work Opportunity Assessment

November 2022

Bristol Bay
Native
Association

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Despite connectivity challenges, remote work is currently prominent in the Bristol Bay region due to impacts and lessons learned since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Approximately a quarter (24 percent) of positions supervised by employers interviewed for this assessment are currently conducted fully or partially remote.

Sentiment around remote work in the region (for industries that can be accomplished remotely) is generally positive, with many employers citing benefits like accommodations for lack of childcare in the region, lightening overhead costs, and expanding employment opportunities for residents. Primary drawbacks mentioned by employers included the potential rise in outsourcing talent, change in workplace culture, and steep management learning curve.

The vision for remote work in the Bristol Bay region according to interviewees, is a workplace that aligns with **local flexibility norms** (including subsistence leave), retains some **in-person engagement** (such as quarterly events), and emphasizes **employee support.** Further developing remote positions in the region will require new training programs and access to funding for remote work tools and community workspaces. Local best practices identified include implementing a variety of communication methods with remote employees, involving employees in decision making processes, and providing quality IT support to employees.

Methodology

1. Literature and data review

Our team gathered and reviewed existing data from Bristol Bay organizations including Bristol Bay Native Corporation (BBNC)'s 2022 Workforce Snapshot, Bristol Bay Native Association's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy report, and industry-specific reports.

2. Key informant interviews

Local employer interviews: A series of **20** interviews with employers in Bristol Bay (and offices in 25 communities) make up the primary source for this assessment. The purpose of these interviews was to evaluate current familiarity with and perceptions of remote work, assess barriers, concerns, and training needs, and to identify a vision for remote work that is unique to Bristol Bay.

Supporting interviews: We also conducted supporting interviews with **five** organizations currently offering remote work (BBNC subsidiaries) supervising **3291** employees, **460** of which are fully or partially remote positions. These organizations were chosen because they offered remote working arrangements prior to the start of the pandemic, giving them more opportunities for trial and error in the implementation of these positions. These interviews were used to identify best practices for transitioning positions to remote arrangements and managing them effectively.

Interview Participants

Bristol Bay Employers

- Bristol Bay Economic Development Corporation
  - *Administration*
  - *Education, Employment, and Training*
- Bristol Bay Native Association
  - *Child Development*
  - *Community Services*
  - *Human Resources*
  - *Information Technology*
  - *Workforce Development*
- Bristol Bay Regional Career and Technical Education Program
- Bristol Bay School District
- Chignik Bay Tribal Council
- Chignik Lake Traditional Council
- City of New Stuyahok
- Ekwok Village Council
- Iliamna Village Council
- Lake and Peninsula Borough School District
- Newhalen Tribal Council
- New Koliganek Village Council
- New Stuyahok Traditional Council
- Twin Hills Village Council
- University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) Bristol Bay Campus

Bristol Bay Native Corporation Subsidiaries

- Bristol Bay Shared Services, LLC
- Bristol Industries
- Bristol Wave Seafoods
- CCI Alliance
- SpecPro Environmental Services, LLC

Local Remote Work Feasibility

Barriers

Lack of Internet Access: According to BBNC's 2022 Workforce Snapshot, as of spring 2022, most industries across the region are *not* considering transitioning to remote work because of **lack of access to high speed internet** and a **need for in-person support staff.** Households and organizations that do have access to an internet subscription often do not have access to broadband speeds (25 Mbps download, 3 Mbps upload), making Zoom calls, server access, and training difficult.

Lack of Access to Funding: Another significant barrier to remote work expressed by interviewees is a **lack of access to funding** that can be used to procure the (often) high-cost tech supplies needed for remote work. This aligns with BBNC Workforce snapshot finding that most organizations (across industries) feel that adding remote positions would **require structural or systems changes**. The most common structural change included the addition of IT support.

Employer Insights: Experiences of Remote Work

The **25** interviewed employers supervise over **650** employees in the Bristol Bay region with **160** (24 percent) of these positions currently completed fully or partially remote. Overall, **21** (84 percent) of interviewed employers offered remote work.

Remote Positions by Job Family
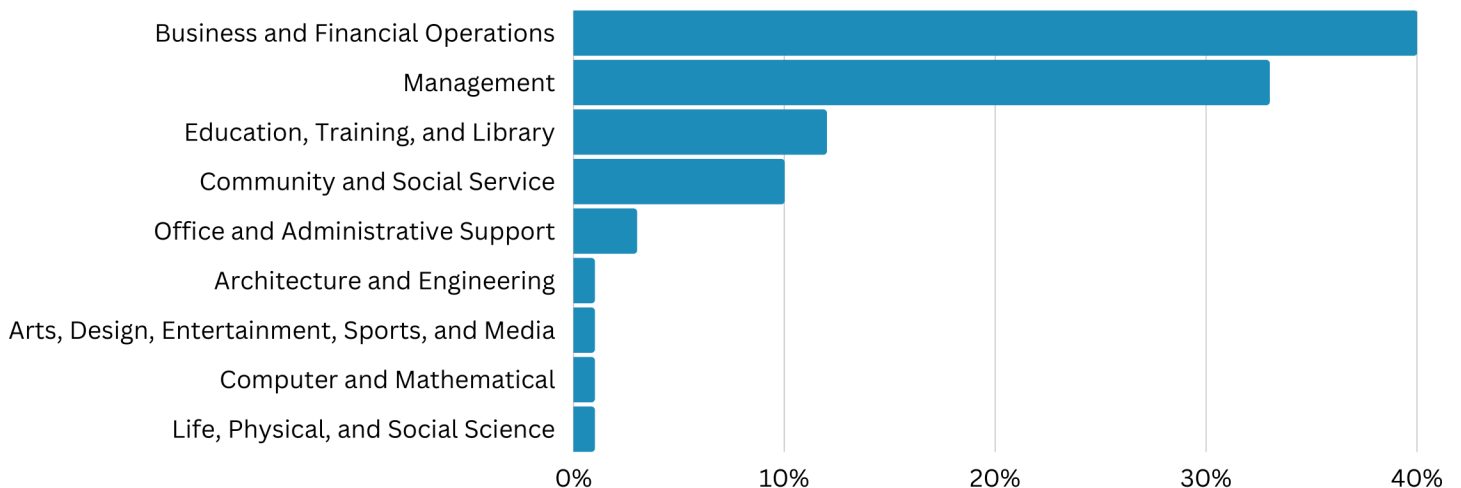
Of the **160** remote positions represented, the largest percentages were in the business and financial operations (40 percent), management (33 percent), and. education training, and library (14 percent) job families.

Employer Insights: Experiences of Remote Work

- **Pre-start of the pandemic:** Remote arrangements or flexible scheduling were pretty limited prior to the pandemic, both in requests from employees and employers offering/granting them. Exceptions would be made for medical reasons.
- **Post-start of the pandemic:** Remote work was conducted out of necessity, and as a result, many employers have learned what is possible for their organization and industry, creating an increase in remote work across the region. It's (now) a common request from employees and is a more common offering by employers.[1] Despite poor connectivity and limited resources, many in the region are already successfully performing their jobs fully or partially remotely. **Out of 650 positions represented by surveyed employers, approximately 150 are currently performed fully or partially remote.**

These trends align with national data: According to Gallup, approximately 45% of work was performed remotely as of September 2021 compared with 6% before the start of the pandemic.[2,3] Studies also indicate that hybrid work is here to stay, with an estimated **59 percent** of employees now preferring a hybrid environment.[4]

---

[1] Some work needs to stay in person; such as a large portion of the education sector and skilled trades. For more information on positions and fields that are generally considered "remote-ready," view the Global Virtual Jobs Assessment.

[2] Saad , L., & Wigert, B. (2022, September 2). Remote work persisting and trending permanent. Gallup.com. Retrieved November 10, 2022, from https://news.gallup.com/poll/355907/remote-work-persisting-trending-permanent.aspx

[3] Coate, P. (2021, January 25). Remote Work Before, During, and After the Pandemic . Remote Work Before, During, and After the Pandemic. Retrieved November 10, 2022, from https://www.ncci.com/SecureDocuments/QEB/QEB_Q4_2020_RemoteWork.html

[4] Wigert, B. (2022, November 10). The Future of Hybrid Work: 5 Key Questions Answered with Data. Gallup.com. Retrieved November 10, 2022, from https://www.gallup.com/workplace/390632/future-hybrid-work-key-questions-answered-data.aspx

Employer Perceptions of Remote Work

Benefits

Accommodations for lack of childcare: Currently there is a statewide childcare shortage. In 2020, Alaska had over **five times** more children than it had documented open slots in licensed child care, accredited child care, and school-age-only programs.[5] This was reflected in interview responses, as approximately a third (32 percent) of those interviewed mentioned that the ability to stay home and care for children or elders was a significant benefit of remote work.

Housing access: The Alaska Housing Finance Corporation reports that "overcrowding in the [Bristol Bay] region is already approximately **5 times** the national average." [6] Many interviewees brought up the potential for remote work to lighten the burden of lack of housing in the Bristol Bay area, allowing people to work from communities they already live in, instead of uprooting and facing the lack of housing access in another area.

Increasing the pool of candidates for employers: Many felt that a main advantage of remote work was widening the talent pool. Remote work:
- Provides access to disabled workers
- Offers an alternative that would have otherwise kept parents and senior caregivers out of the workforce
- Offers geographic, socioeconomic, and cultural diversity that would not otherwise be possible

Drawbacks

Potential rise in outsourcing talent: Previous studies have found that Bristol Bay employers already face labor shortages / competition with other organizations for qualified hires in their communities.[8] A potential risk of remote work is that it may allow for more organizations to outsource positions to other parts of Alaska or the world, leaving locals behind.

> *"The potential risk of remote work is that it allows organizations to recruit or out-source their technology operations to the lower 48 or even out of the country, which could eliminate positions that would be available to Alaskans."* - Kyle Hardin, BBNA

Loss of productivity: concerns over supervision of remote employees and potential home distractions.

> *"The cultural effect that it had [remote work]: pre-pandemic there was a great team dynamic, now there's not. New hires who have always been remote, they aren't understanding what the company culture is or was."* – Molly Webb, Bristol Bay Shared Services LLC

Loss of workplace culture: Changes in communication styles, decline in workplace morale and social connection were cited by about half of interviewees. Employers also expressed discomfort with the lack of a controlled office environment with remote work.

---

5   Teel, S. (2022, April). Why child care is hard to find. Alaska Economic Trends Magazine. https://laborstats.alaska.gov/trends/apr22art1.pdf

6   Information Insights. (2022, July). Bristol Bay Workforce Snapshot 2022. Bristol Bay Native Corporation. https://bbna.com/wp-
8   content/uploads/2022/05/BBNC-Workforce-Development-Report-2022-small.pdf

Benefits

Broadened employment opportunities for residents: According to the Bristol Bay Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), "Bristol Bay communities have a high average unemployment rate of **8%**, the average per capita income is **$25,049** with the poverty level at **27%**, and an average outmigration of **157** people over the past five years."[7] Approximately **47%** of interviewed employers mentioned that remote work will greatly broaden opportunities for Bristol Bay residents and address unemployment, particularly in smaller, more rural communities since employees will have access to a larger employment pool and remote training opportunities.

"I think the opportunities broaden for a wide range of work situations, and just provides residents the opportunity to be in a place they love, and have a high quality of life and have high quality work." - Bill Hill, Superintendent, Bristol Bay Borough School District

Higher quality of life for employees: Remote work typically offers a degree of flexibility, the option to work from the comfort of your own home or chosen workspace, and it saves time and money that would otherwise be devoted to a commute

Flexibility and autonomy: For employees, flexibility with navigating personal lives and schedules and accomplishing work at your discretion is a major benefit.

Improved culture and productivity: reductions of water cooler rumor mills or lost productivity from workplace distractions, as well as increased morale from people who want to be remote

Drawbacks

Learning Curve: Employers have to figure out how to help their remote employees be successful. Some employers expressed that their positions require a lot of face-to-face time to understand the culture and environment and are not well-suited to remote new-hires. Remote employees in these environments have often gained substantial in-person experience with their position before transitioning to hybrid or fully remote arrangements. Other employers expressed concerns with helping their remote employees **maintain a work life balance and uninterrupted work environment.**

Ability to communicate effectively: having to put a lot more work into communication in a remote environment

"I think the lack of communication would be a big concern, as well as the employee's mental health, the work life balance, you know, do they shut off? Because I know for myself, if I'm working from home, sometimes it can be one of two things, either you're not getting a full day because something is distracting me, or I'm working, you know, 16 to 17 hours because my laptop is open, and I walk by and see something. So how do you manage those two extremes?" – *Anonymous*

Work-life balance and mental health: concern over isolation for remote workers, and potential for over-work.

---

[7] BBNA Economic Development Program. (2022, June 13). CEDS – Bristol bay. Bristol Bay Native Association. Retrieved November 10, 2022, from https://bbna.com/ceds-bristol-bay/

Benefits

Decreasing overhead costs: Global Workplace Group estimates that "A typical U.S. **employer can save $11,000 a year** for each worker that works remotely 2 to 3 days a week." [9] It's estimated that employees save between $600 and $6,000 per year by working at home half the time. Those savings are primarily due to reduced costs for travel, parking, and food. In terms of time, a half-time telecommuter saves the equivalent of 11 workdays per year in time they would have otherwise spent commuting. Extreme commuters save more than three times that." [10]

> *"What's interesting is that we've found that out of that, we can still hold meetings with out of state clients no matter the level of importance. (vs. traveling and having to justify travel costs)."*
> *– Anonymous*

Employee retention: Over 70% of employees report that the ability to telecommute will be somewhat to extremely important in choosing their next job.[11] When an employee's location preference doesn't match their current work location, burnout rises while engagement drops.[12] Employees are more likely to be satisfied in their work environment when they are able to work remotely when they want to.

Drawbacks

Funding: Global Workplace Group "conservatively projects the out-of-pocket technology cost for supporting a remote worker at $1.4K every three years, and another $1K every five years for home office furniture costs." The annual home office cost per half-time remote worker is approximately $666."[13] Many employers expressed concerns over a lack of funding for new remote setups and negotiation over what employers are expected to provide for their remote staff.

Security and confidentiality of sensitive files and information: transitioning physical files to digital documents and having the ability to keep them secure and accessible to only those who need them.

9   Global Workplace Analytics. (2021). The Business Case for Remote Work. Design Public Group. https://globalworkplaceanalytics.com/wp-content/uploads/edd/2021/01/The-Business-Case-for-Remote-Work-2021-Report-Final-Web-1.pdf

10 Lister, K. (2022, January 18). Key Telecommuting Data and Trends. Global Workplace Analytics. Retrieved November 10, 2022, from https://globalworkplaceanalytics.com/telecommuting-statistics

11 Global Workplace Analytics. (2021, October 8). Costs and benefits - global workplace analytics - agile work, and more. Global Workplace Analytics. Retrieved November 10, 2022, from https://globalworkplaceanalytics.com/resources/costs-benefits#toggle-id-11

12 Wigert, B., & Agrawal, S. (2022, November 10). Returning to the office: The current, preferred and future state of remote work. Gallup.com. Retrieved November 10, 2022, from https://www.gallup.com/workplace/397751/returning-office-current-preferred-future-state-remote-work.aspx

13 Global Workplace Analytics. (2021). The Business Case for Remote Work. Design Public Group. https://globalworkplaceanalytics.com/wp-content/uploads/edd/2021/01/The-Business-Case-for-Remote-Work-2021-Report-Final-Web-1.pdf

A Regional Vision for Remote Work

When asked to envision what a successful, robust remote workforce in Bristol Bay would ideally look like, employers envision the need to keep some in-person connection and communication where possible:

- **Retain hybrid capabilities:** remain in the office at least part time, either because of the type of work or to maintain the connection that cannot be replaced with people remotely.
- **Establish community workspaces:** Based on preliminary results from BBNA's Bristol Bay Remote Work Opportunity Survey, **73 percent** of surveyed community members think it would be beneficial to have a computer lab or shared workspace in their community.

> *"In 10 years, I envision a region that has grown and flourished with the increased access to affordable high-speed internet. The area has seen growth in high-paying jobs, instead of contracting overseas engineers, companies are working remotely with local engineering firms. Young and enthusiastic professionals are relocating to the area to take advantage of all that the region has to offer while still being able to work in their chosen fields. The area's service sector also experiences growth, restaurants and stores are doing well and able to hire more employees. With a greater ability to work from home, the strain on childcare services in the area is reduced."* - Bristol Bay Region Career and Technical Education Program (BBRCTE)

Cultivating the Remote Workforce

Trainings Needed:

For managers:

- How to manage remote staff
- Orienting and engaging new remote employees
- Communication methods for training and onboarding

> *"There used to be a lot of training in person that has gone remote. We need to work on how to best train remotely and keep folks engaged. There have been a lot of instances where people were not actually at the meetings. (cameras off/sitting in docs but not there)."* – Molly Webb, Bristol Bay Shared Services LLC

For anyone:

> *"You can't have a good, robust, remote working economy without remote education, opportunities particularly for youth, who may be seeking direction fresh out of high school. If they see that those opportunities are available to them right out of school, then they're able to benefit from them and start their careers wherever they happen to be in their community instead of the traditional view of meeting to relocate to a population center for education, and perhaps ever coming back."* - Kyle Hardin, BBNA

- Effective remote communication
- Technical trainings / technological fluency (IT support is often unavailable in the region)
- Managing remote workloads
- Independent work skills
- Organizational skills
- Accounting skills

Coordination needed:

It would take agency partnerships (look at full data) willing to build infrastructure for their desired workforce for whole communities. One suggestion that emerged from the key informant interviews was the creation of a Bristol Bay job board that's available to everybody who lives in the region with a posting of positions available by distance that can be done with the bandwidth and the equipment that's in each region.

Making the Transition to Remote Work

Changes

When asked what changes would allow more positions to be transitioned to remote, employers highlighted changes in the way equipment is issued to employees and making sure employees have what they need to do their job at home. This aligns with standard practices for outfitting remote employees. Studies show that "work from home subsidies generally range from $500 - $1,500/employee for home office outfitting".[14] Based on a survey of employers conducted by Design Public Group and Global Workspace Analytics in August of 2020, 92 percent of employers had provided their people with a laptop computer, 68% had provided a webcam, 54% had provided a second monitor." Also worth noting for additional context: "Though six in ten employers feel providing home office furniture is a good idea, only 15% do; another 41% are considering it. A majority of leaders feel the employer should absorb the cost of a home office set up for those who continue to work from home three or more days a week post-pandemic." [15]

> *"We had to allow for some equipment purchasing like scanners, monitors, - bought a corporate zoom account, kind of shifting what meetings looked like, how we all communicated - staff had to bring their laptops in to get the VPN connectivity to our servers."* – Anonymous

---

[14] Design Public Group. (2021). Factsheet: Home Office Stipends. Global Workplace Analytics. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1W-etzlnssPMSe93eO767rXba6PZ3A_V9/view?usp=share_link

[15] Global Workplace Analytics. (2021). The Business Case for Remote Work. Design Public Group. https://globalworkplaceanalytics.com/wp-content/uploads/edd/2021/01/The-Business-Case-for-Remote-Work-2021-Report-Final-Web-1.pdf

Employers also highlighted a need to spend more time staying attuned to ways of improving the telecommuting experience of staff as many changes are coming to the industry. Finding ways of acknowledging hard work, understanding how different kinds of stressors develop in online work environments, and making sure policies are adaptive to employee needs were all prominent themes.

> *"If you're in person, the office will buy you lunch. And I was like, Well, you know, what did we do with our employees that are not in the office, you know, and so we just let everybody one either DoorDash food to their location to their home, and we reimburse them, or we sent something, you know, gift cards or things like that. So that's another, I call them morale boosters. So, if you are remote, or if your team is remote, you know, just kind of do a good deed every now and then. I think that can go a long way.* – Anonymous

Local Best Practices

- **Local flexibility norms:** Many organizations offering remote work in the region offer a high degree of scheduling flexibility (4 day weeks, determining one's own hours, flexible hours to accommodate for care responsibilities, etc.) There is also a resounding offering of subsistence leave across the board for most organizations interviewed. Regardless of being paid or not, it is set up as separate time from any other PTO offered. The main exception are those in the education sector, as most positions will already have the summer season off which happens to align with many subsistence activities.
- **Retaining some in-person / hybrid engagement:** One best practice that emerged among local interviewees was hosting quarterly in-person events to help establish and maintain culture and connection among colleagues.
- **Employee support:** When asked what employers would like to retain when transitioning positions to remote arrangements, the top mentions were maintaining systems and policies put into place to support remote workers, regularly and deliberately checking in with employees on how they are doing and anticipating when employees need support and being there with it at the right time.

> *"We want to ensure that remote workers feel they can reach out to IT for assistance at any time; it's difficult to find a digital/remote equivalent of popping your head into an office doorway and asking a quick computer question."* – Kyle Hardin, BBNA

Best Practices for Implementing Remote Work: A Long-Term Remote Employer Perspective

1. **Over-communicate:** When asked for the single-most important practice around implementing remote work, interviewed employers stressed the importance of **over-communication.**
   a. **Find and implement different ways to communicate** through online one-on-ones and check-ins, phone calls, utilizing remote communication tools such as project management software or messaging programs like Slack and online profile cues like idle, away, available, etc. It is important that managers communicate diligently with remote workers in whatever style is set up for that company, whether it be texting, group huddles, emails, or Zoom meetings. Interviewees also mentioned that expectations around these communication methods must be clearly established from the beginning, with proper training provided to new employees.
   b. **Check in with your remote staff:** not only see how they are doing with their responsibilities, but also with their mental health - many employers stressed that isolation from the pandemic has and still is affecting a lot of people.
2. **Involve employees in decision making:** Make sure you have all the right people at the table when you make the decision to transition to remote work - who will be affected? Prioritize offering remote work in a way that fits into **your culture and needs,** not because you feel you have to offer it. If remote work is going to be offered, putting a lot of thought into the job description and vetting process is essential to be sure you are attracting candidates who will be the right fit to work successfully in that environment.
3. **Provide IT support:** Having IT departments or personnel that manage this specifically was mentioned multiple times by employers. Using VPN access was also mentioned as a tool that is used to ensure access is private and protected.

"Make sure [communication is] thorough, and just check on your employees. Because while some people prefer and can work remotely, some may not be able to, and with the mental health issues that we have in the world right now, and isolation from COVID, I've found that a lot of our employees struggled. So, I would just say check on your employees, just be over communicative, you can never over communicate." – Anonymous