





# Will Landmen Join the Remote Workforce?

An observational theory how remote employment has impacted the landman industry

BY AARON D. ESTES, MBA

**S**tarting in early 2020, due to the crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the workforce in the United States was either terminated or forced to work remotely. All industries, from top to bottom, struggled to try and convert their houses, apartments and garages into makeshift offices or assembly lines. Personally, I remember carving out a corner of my crowded and overflowing garage into a mini office with foldout furniture, power strips and a space heater, all while using Christmas decorations to hold my printouts. We converted the rest of the house into a makeshift school for my four children, who range from preschool to middle school.

With this change, many companies across several industries worried that employees working from home would cause a drop in productivity and loss of efficiency due to distractions and lack of supervision. Additionally, smaller entrepreneur-style companies tried to create new ways to accomplish their work activities while quarantined and cut off from supplies and clients. In the end, this new challenge resulted in some of the most creative and imaginative outcomes in the history of business. Services such as Microsoft Teams, Skype for Business, Cisco Webex Meeting and Zoom developed and improved their platforms to meet the demand for virtual team collaboration. Shareware, big data and online managing systems, while already existing, became indispensable for all industries. We saw everyone, everywhere, step up and answer the demand created for the remote worker. It revolutionized the model for businesses moving forward, and today, it is reflected in all industries and employers.

According to an article on Zippia.com, in the year 2018, only about 5% of workers worked from home or remotely. In 2020, that number jumped to over 41% and has since settled back to around 27%, with 16% of U.S. companies being fully remote. This number is small in contrast to the 44% of companies that refuse to shift to remote work. Yet, this trend is predicted to switch, as 59% of workers are more likely to choose companies with remote work, and about 23% would take a 10% pay cut to work remotely.

Additionally, according to a survey by ConnectSolutions, 77% of employees who work remotely show increased output, with 30% doing more work in less time and 24% doing more work in the same amount of time. This new data, combined with the positive change in employees' overall attitudes due to their remote work, point to a likely future where the majority of employees will be working out of their home offices. With technology blazing new trails in directions that could never have been conceived pre-pandemic, the decision to go remote has never been easier for many companies.

### Remote Work & Landmen

But where does this leave the landman? Our job and industry are unique from other fields in that we work with infrastructure and as the professional title suggests, land. So, the question is: can a landman be a remote worker?

I have had this debate with several of my colleagues over the past few years, and there has been no definitive answer to this complex question. Seeing so many workers in other industries switch to a non-commute life and talk about the joys of being able to spend more time with family at home, has been surreal. This has caused a lot of us landmen to long for some of that good life. And who can blame us for not wanting to spend most of our lives driving all over kingdom come in a car, living in a cheap hotel for months at a time and working out of a satellite office that is nothing more than a cheap rental space with foldup furniture and a makeshift kitchen? Why can't we do our work from the comforts of home surrounded by our spouse, kids and pets, all while wearing comfortable shorts and a professional work shirt for the Zoom calls?

Some people in my industry argue that, like any other job these days, all you need to do your job as a landman is your phone, computer, internet and good reception — almost everyone has access to those things. They can negotiate online via video calls or emails. Similarly, when it comes to permitting and title, a lot of it can be done online.

On the other side, some landmen claim that boots on the ground with eye-to-eye contact can never be replaced with technology. Landowners respect a firm handshake and a relationship that is built on interactions over time. People respect the effort, and we need to show it by knocking on the door and holding the owner's hand through the process of a project.

So which side is right and which side is wrong?

### The Pros & Cons of Working Remotely as a Landmen

Recently, I was faced with this question, as I was in the middle of transitioning from jobs. I had the unfortunate timing of living in Utah after its real estate market had just exploded into one of the most expensive places to purchase or rent a home. And with a wife, four kids, and two dogs, you can imagine how this might cause me to struggle financially. While I had a job with great benefits that I enjoyed, and a company I respected, I was barely making enough to survive in that market. I was forced to make a decision — either demand that the company pay me more or transfer me to a more affordable location. But even before I got a chance to address the matter, I was let go.



So, I went in search for a new job and made sure that I kept in mind how severe the cost of living would be in deciding where to work and how much I got paid. The next company I interviewed with offered me a promotion but wanted me to move to Massachusetts. I thought that their offer was fair, however, it would not have covered my living expenses, and I would have been in a worse position than before. However, they were willing to work with me, so we created a comprehensive plan that allowed me to live in Ohio with my family and work remotely as a project manager in Boston while assisting with smaller projects in Ohio.

Now, I know you might be saying that this answers the question and proves that landmen can work remotely, but like all things, the devil is in the details. To be transparent, I still must fly out every few months to the project that I am working on, and we still have the necessity of another person on the ground to complete several in-person tasks which are not limited to submittal of paperwork, meetings with landowners and several other responsibilities that cannot be done several states away. Without the someone who is able to tend to these tasks in person, I would not be able to work remotely like I do.

The answer, I believe, is a fusion of the two. While most of the duties and tasks can be performed remotely from home, we will never truly be able to give up the in-person responsibilities. Additionally, I will be the first to admit that nothing beats visiting the project and seeing it with your own eyes versus experiencing it through GIS, drawings and aerial maps. There is also a stronger connection built when

meeting someone in person and getting to know them on a more personal level. The idea is to figure out the best way to integrate these techniques and take advantage of the tools we now have available while not giving up on both.

A great example of this working would be my wife and her work as a senior title agent. She has worked on several projects spanning the four corners of the United States — all from the comfort of her own home. She, along with a dozen other title agents, will log into county courthouses, scour the internet, call county clerks and use online databases to pull together comprehensive title certificates. These are then reviewed by management and uploaded to a database for the client. However, there are always some properties that will need to be searched for in the actual counties and courthouses. This is when an agent on the ground is indispensable. Several companies currently use this method of title work, and it has proven to be the most inexpensive and efficient way to pull title. But this method took time and practice to create. There were a lot of mistakes that were made along the way. Additionally, there was a lot of resistance from companies and agents at the beginning, from fear of lost revenue to the fear of change.

### Closing Thoughts

As we move forward in the land acquisition industry, we need to take into consideration the changing of times and progression. My company and I are seriously looking at the challenges of employees demanding remote work. We know that, like the rest of the industry, we cannot expect our business to grow and compete in today's market while other industries can offer youth entering the workplace more advantages and opportunities. We, as an industry, need to find a way to offer remote work even if it is a hybrid model that gives the worker more time at home and less time traveling and sitting in an office. This will take careful consideration and planning. I am sure that as we labor to create this new work model, we will more than likely make mistakes and mess up along the way. But this effort is important for survival in this industry and for the betterment of employees' lives. It's important to me, and it should be important to you too. 🌟



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