



ADAPTING, THRIVING AND EMBRACING THE NEW NORMAL?

A Young Professional's Take

BY CALLIE HOWARD, R/W-AC

On March 12, 2020, I stepped out our fifth-floor office in Williams Tower in Houston, Texas, believing we would only be gone for a few weeks. Fast-forward to a year later, we've experienced something no one thought would happen in our lifetime. From my personal experience, I've seen our world managing the H1N1 (commonly known as swine flu) pandemic in 2009, to going through one of the worst economic downturns since the Great Depression right around the time I graduated with my bachelor's in late 2009. Great timing, right?

Today, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted us in all ways imaginable across the globe. Regardless of your stance on the subject, we can all mostly agree that *Life. Is. Different.* We're thriving the best we can.

Across the world, we have experienced a plethora of eye-opening events to which life has continued in what we call the new "normal." Friends, family and colleagues of all career ages have suffered job losses or reduced incomes, given the frightening pace of our business downturn during the pandemic. While our seasoned professionals have experienced turmoil, hysteria and economic troubles within their careers and lifetimes, the young professionals of today are witnessing and experiencing the impacts caused by the condensed pandemonium of last year and counting.

Today, we see students learning online without much choice. We see professionals of all ages seeking employment after being laid off due to the pandemic. We see the end of our brick-and-mortar offices as we've come to know them. The list could go on and on, but what we do know is that like many, COVID-19 has impacted young professionals the same as it's affected everyone.

An Economic Policy Institute article stated:

"Young workers are among the most vulnerable in this economy. They tend to have high unemployment and underemployment rates compared with older workers; they tend to work in the industries and occupations that have had the largest job losses due to the COVID-19 shutdown ... Given what we know about the long-lasting effects of recessions on young workers, young workers will likely suffer negative consequences for years to come."

I was shocked by the severity of this article. Was this what was really going on with my colleagues?

As a personal experiment, I sent a survey out to my colleagues with the IRWA Young Professionals group at the Regional level to share within their respective areas. I received a handful of responses, and while this isn't representative of how all young professionals feel in the industry, I feel it's important to provide a platform for those who did respond; there is strength in community and listening to one another.





The majority of my respondents stated they were working in a home office setting. One stated: “I have not been to an office regularly since March of 2020. This has erased my two-hour-a-day commute, which has been a great benefit. I’m able to work comfortably from my home and that has a lot of great convenient benefits.”

I could relate to this. Regardless of whether or not you’re a young professional, it’s likely that you’ve felt this as well. A vast majority of people within our industry is still working remotely and are thankful that our industry allows this.

Similar to the respondent, my 120-mile round-trip commute into Houston and back home is a thing of the past. It’s no longer necessary to be in the office daily. People are not confined to vehicles for hours every day. We have less people on roadways and more people being productive in the safety and comfort of their homes. Our colleagues of all ages have been forced to learn and be productive at home because business must “go on as usual.” But what is usual? I still catch myself a year into this saying, “when

things go back to normal.” Wake-up call — this is normal. Remember, the old adage, “21 days forms a habit?” Well, we’ve had plenty of “21 days” to form this new habit. So why do many of us still feel this way? Respondents shared some of their thoughts on the “new normal”:

- The biggest change would be how we communicate with others such as colleagues, property owners and our clients. COVID-19 has taken away the comfort of meeting in person to develop and build strong relationships which is a huge part of our role as ROW Agents. We’ve had to find innovative ways to continue to meet with owners through a virtual platform and work through technology barriers effectively because ultimately ... the work still needs to get done.
- There are less one-on-one meetings with property owners ... the plus is virtual conferencing, meetings and classes, etc. have really been great and extremely helpful and appreciated! Thank you technology!





- In the current climate, I am being called upon by my division and colleagues to serve in a dual position. Not only am I expected to complete my normal tasks as a real estate specialist, but I am also being called on to serve people in an IT capacity as well. My Division has transitioned well into the telework/remote environment. I have found that those who would have been traditionally opposed to major technology changes are far more open to trying something new.

Zoom. Microsoft Teams. Skype. FaceTime. Modern technology has allowed many of us to continue to flourish and has offered the opportunity to show that regardless of age, we are capable of adapting in business. Although many of us are thankful for these online services that bring our teams together while still staying safe, it doesn't come without its woes. As stated above, some are taking on multiple roles and many — including myself — have seen our interactions change with landowners. Extra precautions are taken with masks and bottles of sanitizer, but many are still concerned with the long-term effects of the pandemic on these crucial interactions. Respondents also expressed their concerns over the pandemic and how it's affected their work:

- Clients have instructed us to no longer meet property owners in the field. I do not expect these unusual circumstances to be any sort of "normal." I anticipate standards of practice will return as they were previously, except for with additional sanitary procedures (hand wipes, no shaking hands, distance, etc.).
- I also believe the good southern hand shake will no longer be a normal thing.
- COVID-19 has made some aspects of right of way work more challenging, as some landowners have been more difficult to contact and meet in person.
- The new normal has become working from home and negotiating all pipeline deals over the phone from the living room of my home.

I believe with the pressures in society, business and within our own realms of capabilities, we know that change is inevitable. But the change is evolving daily as new measures, precautions and requirements are set forth by our companies and governing bodies. We've transitioned and have had to adapt, but in the long run, I believe will be beneficial to both the employee and employer. A little sanitizer never hurt anyone, and I feel that is a small price to pay for forward movement. Still, one cannot deny that the effects of the coronavirus has definitely dampened our interactions with our colleagues, landowners and within our personal lives on every level.

Young professionals are struggling with less interactions and the transition from learning in a hands-on working environment to a virtual one, as well as for some, working more hours in the shift to a remote workforce. The Society for Human Resource Management published an article in December that stated the following:

“Nearly 70% of professionals who transitioned to remote work because of the pandemic say they now work on the weekends, and 45% say they regularly work more hours during the week than they did before, according to a survey of 2,800 workers by Los Angeles-based staffing firm Robert Half. The survey also found that working parents were more likely to work weekends and more than eight hours per day than those without children. Men were more likely than women to report working on weekends and putting in 40-plus hour workweeks. And more workers under the age of 40 said they usually work weekends and more than eight hours per day than those older than 40.”

Not only have our work hours changed, but boundaries are hard to create when the home becomes the office and the office is the home. Distractions and problems with technology can easily disrupt one's workflow, which can be frustrating and lead to an increase in work hours. Moreover, the combination of working more but having less interactions with colleagues and friends can be mentally taxing for some. Sometimes it's hard to imagine a day where you can feel and be inspired by the intensity of your peers through their negotiations or attend an in-person conference. I miss the industry-wide events where you could physically interact with your colleagues from all over the country or even our monthly Young Professional's happy hour. One can only hope that as 2021 progresses, the old will merge with the new to create a society in which we are more cautious but optimistic as we evolve with more flexible work environments and social interactions. Our respondents stated:

- I believe many companies will show a more relaxed attitude toward teleworking and employees will want a modified schedule which includes several days per week at home. I would imagine that employers will want to downsize on their overhead costs by reducing brick-and-mortar locations in favor of telework. The pandemic has shown that we save time on commuting and are equally productive at home.
- Things will get back to normal eventually. Mask-wearing and social distancing may be around for a bit longer though. There may be a cultural change of working from home when you are sick (which probably should have always been around). Hopefully employers will feel they can trust their employees to work more from home.
- Our company is more comfortable with a larger percentage of the staff working remotely and a certain percentage of the staff would prefer to never lose the option to work remote, going forward. There will be increased flexibility in the future, so connecting and building a healthy culture is going to have to be more intentional than ever.



What I see out of this is that young professionals are adaptive, innovative and embracing the change. More interesting, I polled our young professionals in the various service arms of the right of way industry to see how their field is handling the change and I believe that some of their comments reinforce what was said: we are adaptive, innovative and embrace the change.

- As a right of way agent working for a consulting firm, I think we have easily adapted to the change. Our staff already had company provided laptops, making the transition fairly easy for most. Finding a space to work at home seems to be the greatest challenge others on the team have faced. I am personally flourishing with the change because of the reduced commute and not having to stress about time. I also have a computer science background, so I was very well set up for remote work and transitioned very easily.
- I believe the right of way industry has adapted nicely to the changes. Working from home has great advantages and does not appear to affect work flow. It is easier to work more because I can start early, take a break and work later if necessary. On the other hand, it was an adjustment switching to video meetings and conference calls, but I have found that many professionals quickly adjusted and embraced the change.
- I currently work in local government as a ROW Specialist. There have been significant changes in terms of the utilization of technology to complete daily tasks and improve year-old processes. I have been struggling to ensure some of the new processes are kept as we move towards the new normal. Many people assumed that the changes that were made were only temporary but I am advocating for them to be long-term/permanent changes. Taking on this initiative has given me an opportunity to flourish and has brought recognition to some of my other professional skills (i.e. IT, problem solving six sigma, etc.).

Overall, we are seeing that our young professionals are moving forward at a positive rate. Albeit, a vast majority of the young professionals really feel as if the ability for less social interactions has proven to be the toughest “struggle,” I believe that everyone is working to make the most of it. We have the ability to have happy hours on Zoom and sit in driveways and parks. It is, at worst, different and a challenge. The fear we felt in the beginning of the unknown from the world around us, missing our people and the uncertainty of our careers in an industry dependent on public good, as well as oil and gas, is subsiding.

A Forbes article in December 2020 stated:

“Remote working does not result in productivity declining. Indeed, for many, the remote environment has made them more productive because they’re better able to craft an environment that works for them. This extends to things like the choice of work attire, the availability of pets, and the ability to personalize their workplace entirely.”

Even in our toughest days, which I believe to be behind us, the simple virtual exchanges through Zoom and social-distanced gatherings have proven that even in terrible times, that these connections remind us that life goes on and we will get through it. I stumbled upon this simple but profound quote recently, and it’s stuck with me ever since: “The most dangerous phase in the language is, ‘we’ve always done it this way.’” Not anymore. We are living in unprecedented times, but WE are here to make the best of the new normal. We are flourishing, we are recreating modern life where the focus can be both on business and our people, while creating a way of life that is adaptive to the daily changes often beyond our reach. 🌟



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