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Town of Aurora

General Committee Report

No. CS22-031

Subject: Post-COVID-19 Pandemic Recovery and Future Work Model

Prepared by: Demetre Rigakos, Manager, Human Resources

Department: Corporate Services

Date: July 5, 2022

Recommendation

1. That Report No. CS22-031 be received; and
2. That the Guiding Principles for the development of future Alternative Work Policies be adopted.

Executive Summary

This report provides an overview on the steps the Town's administration took to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic over the past two years. Also, it provides a summary of the steps the administration is taking as we move forward in our recovery plans post COVID-19.

Over the past two years the organization has had to introduce changes to the way we operate as a response to the pandemic crisis and to protect the health and safety of our employees and the public we serve.

Processes have changed, new digital service channels have been introduced to maintain business continuity and continue to provide all essential services to our citizens.

As the public health restrictions have almost reached a point where they are completely being lifted, we are turning our efforts to planning out our next steps in terms of adjusting to a post COVID-19 work environment.

Phase 1 (March-April 2022) of the Town's recovery efforts focused on returning employees gradually to the office environment as required and when required to meet service needs.

Phase 2 (May-August 2022) of the Town's recovery efforts will continue to focus on incorporating feedback and learnings from employees and leaders into our future flexible work policies and procedures.

Phase 3 (September-December) the Town will be formalizing hybrid work and broadening the definition of flexible work arrangements to introduce features such as compressed work week and flexible start and end times.

Phase 4 (January-June 2023) will be used to implement the newly developed alternative work arrangements policy across the organization.

The Future Work Model and associated policies will be guided by the following set of principles:

- I. Citizen Experience, Business Continuity, and Innovation
- II. Employee Attraction and Retention
- III. Fiscal Responsibility
- IV. Our Environment and Optimization of Physical Space
- V. Change Management
- VI. Culture
- VII. Excellence Canada Gold Certification

Background

In March 2020, in response to the developing COVID-19 pandemic situation, the Town of Aurora closed municipal facilities and sent many of its employees to work from home where possible. Several health and safety measures were implemented for staff that were required to work at our facilities to comply with public health measures and maintain a healthy and safe work environment for all our employees and for the public we serve.

Since that time, approximately 60 per cent of the Town's workforce has seamlessly continued working from home, by being equipped with the tools to work remotely (virtual meetings, collaboration tools, soft telephony tools, etc.) Some of our essential

and public-facing municipal service staff have continued to work from Town facilities throughout the pandemic with some staff returning to the workplace as services reopened to the public. Service levels have been maintained across the Town and some of the evidence has also shown increased efficiencies and productivity through the use of technology.

The Town understands the importance of keeping up with employment trends to attract and retain the best and brightest talent, so we can deliver efficient and effective public service to the residents of Aurora. As we look ahead toward our recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Town introduced a phased approach to our recovery plans that will allow us to carefully balance the needs of our community from a service level expectation with the needs of our employees from a workstyle preference.

Analysis

The administration took several steps to adapt in response to COVID-19 and preparing for the Future

Collaboration with York Region municipalities.

The Chief Administrative Officers of all ten York Region municipalities have been meeting regularly to discuss issues of common concerns and identify approaches to sharing resources, ideas, and approaches to better serve our communities.

Examples include: Vaccination policies, Vaccination clinics, Research by the Conference Board of Canada into the Future Work Model, as well as wellness related surveys administered by Dr. Linda Duxbury, a professor and researcher who has dedicated her research in assessing workplace policies on work life balance. Dr. Duxbury's research has highlighted the elevated levels of psychological illness in the workplace due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, other subgroups have formed their own working groups to address similar issues of concerns such as human resources leaders, health, and safety specialists, etc.

The collaboration between the staff across the entire region has created stronger relationships and collaboration on common challenges as well as uniform approaches to how we address future plans.

Conference Board of Canada research into the Future Work Model for York Region municipalities.

In June 2021, all ten York Region municipal CAOs and HR Leaders participated in a research project conducted by the Conference Board of Canada to examine the benefits and challenges of fully on-site, fully remote and hybrid workplace models. The work included consultations with all CAOs as well as HR leaders along with literature review and the formulation of recommendations for implementation. The outcome of this research was published in a report titled [Workplaces for the Future](#). A Playbook for Municipal Leaders on Exploring Remote, Hybrid, and On-Site Models.

The hybrid model where some of the office related work is performed onsite and some remotely was the leading trend among municipalities as a means of optimizing service delivery. The benefits of this model were identified as acceleration of technology, shared workspaces, social connection, and reduction of office space. Some of the challenges identified included scheduling and coordination and employee inclusivity.

The report included recommendations on how municipalities can transition effectively to a hybrid model including communicating expectations on vaccination policies, focusing on key performance indicators and employee accountability, redefining workplace culture, enhancing the organization's digital transformation strategy, incorporating different forms of flexibility, communicating expectations about residence and engaging stakeholders.

Surveys to capture the voice and input of our People

Over the past two years the organization has deployed surveys to understand the perspective of our people. Overwhelmingly our staff have expressed interest in workplace flexibility. Some employees want to work remotely occasionally while others prefer working remotely for a larger portion of the work week. Finding the right balance that serves the needs of the business as well as the employee preferences is key to successfully implementing this type of work model.

Performance Measurement Program

In early 2021, Staff shared with Council the Town's Corporate Strategic Plan framework. Staff have continued to work on fine tuning the strategic plan, including finalizing the integrated business planning process. Over the past several months staff have turned their attention to looking at options to design and implement a performance measurement program that can be implemented across the

organization. Significant progress has been made in this area including identifying the appropriate methodology, ensuring alignment across the leadership of the organization and scheduling workshops in the month of May 2022, to implement the new program. One of the cascading benefits of this program will be the ability to track progress on outcomes at the divisional level and summarizing all the results digitally. This will enable the organization not only to improve collaboration, but it will also make results transparent across the organization and give our leaders the ability to hone in on areas that require attention.

Technological Enhancements

The organization has also made significant progress in improving our technology infrastructure.

These improvements include:

- Implementation of a new Human Resources Information System “ADP Workforce Now” which includes payroll, time, and attendance and many more modules to come.
- Staff have documented the organization’s business/functional requirements and have issued a Request for Proposal to procure an Enterprise Resource Planning / Finance system.
- Office 365 has been implemented across the entire workforce allowing for new collaboration tools including the ability to conduct virtual meetings.
- A new telephony system has been implemented to modernize telephony. This allows for one-click calling for internal and external contacts, real-time call notifications with automated customer data from integrated Office365 tools, call queuing, call forwarding, and much more.
- Digital signature technology has been adopted to permit digital signatures required for approvals creating a quick seamless way of generating instant approvals.

Employee Engagement Action Planning

Several employee committees have been established to review our employee engagement results and provide their input into the development of action plans to address opportunities for improvement. Employee participation in workplace culture improvement initiatives is key to engaging our people in designing the type of workplace that is best for creating a high-performance culture.

Moving Forward

As we enter the second quarter of 2022, we are optimistic that the evolution of COVID-19 will transition from pandemic to endemic. One of the critical decisions local governments are facing is whether we safely revive the traditional office setting or embrace a hybrid strategy as a model that can support innovation. The administration has developed three distinct phases in our recovery plans that will facilitate a smooth process to get our organization to our future work model.

Phase 1 (March-April 2022)

Many public health measures were lifted and for the months of March and April 2022 staff were directed to start coming back into the office space to address in person service needs but also to increase face to face collaboration with their colleagues. The maximum capacity was maintained in our facilities at approximately 30 per cent which allowed for a safe transition back to the office space and slowly over time the capacity limit was eliminated altogether.

Phase 2 (May-August 2022)

During the months of May and June we will continue to learn from our staff and leaders about the gradual return to the office space and start the development and fine tuning of our alternative / remote work policies and procedures. Most municipalities are moving towards a hybrid model of work that will allow the organization to maintain some of the benefits of remote work while at the same time restoring the benefits of being able to collaborate face to face and address in person citizen / customer needs.

Phase 3 (September-December 2022)

In this phase we will broaden our definition of flexible work by incorporating features such as compressed work week and or flexible start and end times. We will also provide an update to Council in terms of the progress we are making and seek its endorsement of the future direction.

Phase 4 (January-June 2023)

During Phase 4 the organization will focus on fully implementing the newly developed Alternative Work Policy and Procedures across the entire workforce. This will allow for a smooth transition where everyone is aware of the options, roles and responsibilities and requests from employees are address in a fair and equitable way while at the same time maintaining high quality services to our citizens.

Guiding Principles on the Future Work Model

The following guiding principles will be adopted to guide our actions in the development of alternative work arrangement policies.

Citizen Experience, Business Continuity, and Innovation

The Town's workforce has adapted over the past two years to continue to provide a seamless citizen experience while maintaining a healthy and safe workforce. The work model that we implement will consider new technologies and processes that support an efficient and modern workforce model while maintaining the same or higher levels of service. The Town's customer experience plan will enable us to receive regular input from on how we are doing in the delivery of services and what adjustments we may need to make to address customer needs.

The digitization of our services over the past few years and more recently during the pandemic has resulted in service efficiencies for our citizens. The introduction of flexible work arrangements will further enhance our ability and availability to respond to our citizen's needs.

The Town of Aurora is a growing municipality with emerging needs. We will continue to be innovative, invest in technology and identify efficiencies to modernize our processes and provide effective and efficient services to our community but also support our workforce with the tools it needs to be effective in their day-to-day work.

Employee Attraction and Retention

The Town's most important asset is its people. Without a healthy, skilled workforce we cannot achieve our strategic plan. The Future Work Model will be designed with a key focus on our people needs from a work-life balance as well as from a psychological and physical health and safety perspective. Our leaders will provide clear direction to our staff in terms of the expected work outcomes, service levels and performance deliverables regardless of physical work location. The Future Work Model will maintain the Town's competitive position in terms of attracting and retaining skilled employees.

Flexible working has emerged as a catalyst for the corporate world throughout the pandemic and will also be a key factor in the 'next normal,' as on average, surveys have shown that employees would want to work between two and three days remotely in a post COVID-19 world.

One of the emerging issues in our communities is housing affordability and commute

times. Providing our employees with flexible work options will address some of these concerns but also enables the Town to attract and retain talent from a broader geographic area thus, increasing our skilled talent as a competitive advantage.

Fiscal Responsibility

We ensure financial sustainability strategies are in place to support the cost-efficient and financially effective delivery of Town services. Decisions are evidence based with the primary objective of ensuring they are aligned with what is best for the community we serve. Therefore, implementing changes to shift our workplace model will be planned, thoughtful and gradual. Change will be funded by existing budgets or, where it makes sense, we will request increases to allotted budgets and will slowly work towards fully implementing our desired workplace model over time.

Our Environment and Optimization of Physical Space

We will continue to look for opportunities to optimize the use of physical space at Town facilities. Our Future Work Model will consider flexible use of space, collaboration areas and maximizing efficient use of the space which builds capacity for future growth. Flexible work options will enable the Town to have a larger environmental impact in our work practices by utilizing less physical space but also by reducing the number of daily commuters.

Change Management

The Future Work Model will necessitate a change in the way we think and the way we work. This will enable us to sustain a healthy, safe, and productive workforce. We will maintain our commitment to staff and support them through this journey and seek their input to ensure the model is one that achieves our objectives. The implementation of the model will include detailed processes and guidelines to ensure that we address employee requests in a fair and equitable way.

Culture

The workplace culture has been affected by the pandemic as employees have been more isolated, have had to juggle protecting their family members, addressing children and elder care issues while at the same time being productive in their roles. Staff have demonstrated the ability to adapt throughout the pandemic despite the challenges they faced both at work and at home. Our improved culture of trust has been demonstrated by staff continuing to produce work and provide excellent customer service to our internal and external stakeholders, even when our technological

infrastructure did not provide us with the same opportunities it does today to connect and work efficiently in a virtual environment.

The Future Work Model will require a continuous shift in our mindset to provide an environment that is founded on trust, collaboration, clear outcome expectations and regular feedback, support, and communication.

Excellence Canada Gold Certification

The above noted guiding principles and proactive actions support the Excellence Canada Gold certification application and the adoption of the future work model will specifically support the “Our People” driver requirements of the application.

The “Our People” driver examines how employees are treated, supported, and empowered to contribute to the organization’s success. It is tied directly to culture, and includes the health, well-being, and inclusion of employees.

In order to accomplish the requirements of the driver the flexible and remote work aspects of the employee experience need to be addressed.

The Town needs to have policies, procedures and best practices related to flexible and remote work. The flexible and remote work policies should consider the diverse needs of the workforce population. As we move through the post-pandemic phases listed earlier in this report, we will look for feedback from our staff and leaders to incorporate flexible work options that address all our employee needs while at the same time continuing to provide seamless service to our citizens and customers.

Advisory Committee Review

Not applicable.

Legal Considerations

None.

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

Communications Considerations

Further communication and training will be required with our staff and leaders to ensure a successful implementation of each phase of our recovery as well as any new flexible work features that are developed.

Climate Change Considerations

The gradual re-integration of employees back into the office along with potential future hybrid work practices are expected to decrease greenhouse gas emissions by reducing the number of employees that are commuting to the workplace on average by 50 percent.

Link to Strategic Plan

This project supports Objective #6: Promoting service accountability, excellence, and innovation.

Alternative(s) to the Recommendation

Council may offer alternative recommendations.

Conclusions

The administration took several steps to adapt its workforce as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This enabled the Corporation to continue to provide services to our residents while maintaining the health and safety of our employees and the public the Town serves. As we emerge from the pandemic the administration has taken small, calculated steps to re-integrate our office employees back in our facilities as needed and when needed to maximize the benefits of both the remote and in office work models. We will continue to learn from our employees and leaders and then develop Alternative Work Policies and procedures that provide options for all employees while we continue to provide quality services to our citizens. The guiding principles identified in the report will be used to ensure future work arrangements adhere to these fundamental principles.

Attachments

None.

Previous Reports

None.

Pre-submission Review

Agenda Management Team review via email.

Approvals

Approved by Techa Van Leeuwen, Director, Corporate Services

Approved by Doug Nadorozny, Chief Administrative Officer