

# Working at Home and the Pandemic's Affirmation of its Values

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After I arrived in Vermont from New York City, my daily 2 hour subway commute changed to 20 minutes a day, in my warm and cozy car. Subways in those days did not have functional air conditioning, and sometimes when I ended my morning commute to Wall Street, I had to deal with a soaking, white shirt after spending an hour standing close to other straphangers. Not so in Vermont, and I did not need air conditioning in my



car. I would just open a window and in a flash I'd be sitting in my new office in Brattleboro. That

is, until one day when snow and ice intervened and my car did a 360 degree spin. Rather than spending my day in a warm and cozy office, I was sitting in a very cold garage as a mechanic added studs to my tires.

I also had to learn the business rules that may have been unique to Vermont, but perhaps not elsewhere. My first mistake was a very significant cultural mistake. Every month we would have a Directors' Trust Committee meeting in Woodstock, Vermont. The average commute for the Directors was a one-hour drive. Having been informed of a projected snow storm, I canceled the meeting. I was told by the higher-ups that no meetings, regardless of weather, should ever be canceled. I sometimes refer to this as a *cultural misunderstanding*.

As the years passed, I encountered the personal computer. Its cost at the time was \$12,000, when nice homes cost \$50,000. I fell in love with PCs and, when the cost descended to an acceptable range, I started buying personal computers for staff members, and personally installed a few in staff homes, once they had access to the internet. The PC was a life-changer. Staff could work at home. I wanted to work at home when I needed to focus free of the interruptions found in most offices. But then once again, I discovered that most of my colleagues did not want to work at home. Another *cultural misunderstanding*.

In my early years, our headquarters were in Brattleboro. Then we opened up branches in Rutland and Burlington, and long drives became the norm. After we formed the Trust Company of Vermont, technology was growing lightning-fast. Why not have big screens, and have the client in Brattleboro meet with a manager based in Burlington on the screen, instead of a 5 hour drive? Do our managers do this? Sometimes. Often, they cluster several client meetings and hop in the car. Another *cultural misunderstanding*.



At the Trust Company of Vermont, we built a system that encourages working at home, in anticipation of a cultural change. This included hiring an outside firm to make sure any offsite communications are not vulnerable. Staff are not allowed to take documents offsite and everything is stored in an internal and highly secure system.



Well, it has arrived faster than we thought now that we have a pandemic. Our system was ready. It allows us to do asset management and trust administration offsite, wherever we may be located. That said, we also like the old-fashioned way of meeting in person with our clients, and this is our plan once the pandemic goes away.