Transcription for

INSIDE HIGHER ED: THE KEY

P. 68 THE ERA OF FLEXIBLE WORK IN HIGHER EDUCATION HAS BEGUN.

NATALIE MCKNIGHT

BRYAN GAREY

DOUG LEDERMAN

NOVEMBER 2021

DECEMBER 20, 2021

NATALIE MCKNIGHT

BRYAN GAREY

DOUG LEDERMAN

38:54

===

[MUSIC]

DOUG LEDERMAN: The era of flexible work in higher education has begun. Hello and welcome to The Key. I'm Doug Lederman, editor and cofounder of Inside Higher Ed, and host of our news and analysis podcast.

The pandemic drastically altered our collective relationship with work in the moment. But how will faculty, staff, and administrative jobs look differently going forward? In this week's episode, we'll hear from administrators at two institutions that are a little ahead of the pack in addressing head on questions that a lot of our organizations are wrestling with. Natalie McKnight is dean of the College of General Studies at Boston University and co-chair of its Committee on the Future of Staff Work, whose recommendations underpin the University's new policy allowing many employees to work up to two days a week from home. Among other things, she described the concerns about competition and retention that helped drive the new policy.

NATALIE MCKNIGHT: Even before we created this committee, and certainly while the committee was meeting, we were already having retention issues, because, you know, we're in Boston. There's a lot of competition, a lot of great universities in the area, and if some of them are offering remote work and you aren't, unless you're offering a ton more money, and even if you were offering a ton more money, you still might lose them because it's a quality of life issue, or it's childcare, or just simply wanting to have more work-life balance even if you don't have children.

DOUG LEDERMAN: We also hear from Bryan Garey, vice president for human resources at Virginia Tech, where nearly 10 percent of the workforce has already qualified to work 100 percent offsite under the University's evolving flexible work policy.

BRYAN GAREY: I think flexible work's essential because, one, the cat is out of the bag, the genii's out of the bottle, pick whatever metaphor you want. We had a work of working remotely and we were able to by and large keep operations going. And you can't just unwind all of that and say, okay, we're done. Crisis is over. Let's get back to the way it was before the pandemic. Because all the studies you see out there is that there's a gap right now, what faculty and staff want. And they want more flexibility. They want to preserve some of what they've enjoyed and learned through working from home. So I don't think we have the choice to retreat.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Before we begin today's conversations, here's a word from Formstack, sponsor of this week's episode.

VOICE: It's time to ditch paper processes. Too many of us are still drowning in paper, fixing printers, and chasing signatures. Formstack helps your teams automate manual processes, streamline student registration, and simplify enrollment, all without code. Learn why 27,000 organizations have turned to Formstack to help them reimagine their world of work. Go to formstack.com/ihe.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Here's my conversation with Natalie McKnight, co-chair of Boston University's Committee on the Future of Staff Work. Natalie, welcome to The Key and thanks for being here.

NATALIE MCKNIGHT: Oh, well, thanks, Doug, for inviting me.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Tell us a little bit about the Committee on the Future of Staff Work that you are helping to lead at BU--what it was charged with doing, and what the major issues are that it addressed, and we'll start there.

NATALIE MCKNIGHT: President Bob Brown initiated this committee in February 2021, so just this year. He formed the committee himself, so it's members from all across campus, many different units, and he

charged us with looking into what kind of remote practices already existed at BU. We didn't have uniform policies, but we knew there are pockets of people using remote work. And, of course, we're talking about prior to the pandemic. I mean, during the pandemic, pretty much everybody was working remotely at least part of the time. And then looking into what was happening in the industry, what's happening in higher ed in general, what are other people doing, what other policies exist out there, what are people thinking, doing a survey of faculty and staff about their ideas about remote work, what they would like to see, and then how productive they felt they had been. And then pulling all that together and making a proposal about what we thought should be in a remote work policy for BU.

And he wanted us to move fast and we moved fast. So we were launched in February. We delivered a report to him in July. It went through... And then it was launched in August along with remote work application online portal, so people could apply. They would be vetted by their immediate supervisor, and then their supervisor's supervisor would also have to sign off. And we're, at this point, we have over a couple of thousand people who have applied for and received remote work. And part of the policy that we suggested was that people in most cases should be able to work two days remotely per week, unless their job was 100 percent forward facing. So there are whole sectors where, like the police force. If you work in the cafeteria, you can't do that job remotely. So some sectors can't work remotely at all, given the nature of their jobs. And some jobs would allow more than that. So we are off and running, and implementing it, and so far, so good.

DOUG LEDERMAN: The committee's name includes the phrase "staff" before work, so this is focused on the nonfaculty employees, correct?

NATALIE MCKNIGHT: Exactly.

DOUG LEDERMAN: What was the high-level thinking there? The faculty already have more flexibility in their work?

NATALIE MCKNIGHT: So very few faculty come to work five days a week, eight, nine hours a day around the calendar year. Most faculty, unless they run a research lab, come to campus when they have classes and office hours, and very few faculty have classes five days a week. So many faculty are on a Monday-Wednesday- Friday schedule. And they teach Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and they put their office hours there and they try to get whatever committee meetings they have to do done in those days. So I'd say three to four days is pretty typical for faculty, so that's two days scheduled. So faculty are already working remotely a lot and always have been.

There are some tensions between faculty and staff, I think, because staff do have to be butt in chair, five days a week, eight, nine hours a day. I think sometimes there's a little bit of resentment of faculty who maybe don't show up all summer. Three months go by, then during the three day, waltz in at 10:00, they teach a couple of classes, have a couple of office hours, waltz away. And here is staff member X, sitting in her seat and thinking, well, geez, that must be nice. [LAUGH]

And, of course, then during the pandemic, we all saw that a lot of staff work could be done remotely because we were doing it remotely. And one of the things we found in the survey we did of faculty and staff, was that people self-reported that they felt that they were more productive working remotely. You might expect that people might want to put a positive spin on their own work. But then we also split out supervisors. And we asked supervisors, did you feel that people were more productive? And they said yes as well. So there was a general consensus that people were actually very productive working remotely.

So if you know you can do it remotely, you know you can be at least as productive, and you can avoid what has been called the worst traffic in the nation, which is what we have here in Boston, and that was a survey done before the pandemic. People spend two hours a day on the road. If you can avoid that a couple of days a week and be more productive, well, why wouldn't you do that?

DOUG LEDERMAN: A lot of our jobs are hard to measure and quantify productivity. Were you wholly dependent on the surveying for the judgments about productivity?

NATALIE MCKNIGHT: We had internal metricsthat we could use from our own units about productivity. So one that I use, I'm the dean of a college, right, and so there are certain things we have to get done at certain times every year. And we had to continue to do all those things that we would always do, we're still teaching, we're still doing performance evaluations, still doing end reports, all this stuff. All of that had to get done. And on top of that, all of the things related to COVID had to get done, so COVID compliance checks, and testing, and attestation, and completely refiguring our program to first fully remote, then hybrid. And we've got this complicated London program, which we had to shift to a New England program... So everything we always had to do, we did. And then on top of that, we did this whole other layer of things that we've never had to do, and it all got done. So to me, it's not just self-reporting, it's not just delusion, we were able to do everything.

DOUG LEDERMAN: What were the thorniest issues that arose during the committee's deliberations?

NATALIE MCKNIGHT: There's a huge issue, and I'm sure you're hearing this in the conversations you have--concern about culture, how do you maintain the culture of an organization if people are, this person's in these three days, this other person's in these three days. There's very little overlap. How do you coordinate unit meetings if nobody, if you never have a single day of the week when everybody is all together? So those are some of the complicated issues, and it's clear if you're a large university like Boston University, you cannot come up with a policy that gets that granular that would apply to everybody, which is why it's very much based on local practices. Your immediate supervisor has to sign off on a specific remote work schedule for you. And the supervisor's supervisor has to sign off because like somebody in my position needs to look across the boards and say, well, do we have adequate coverage on a day-to-day basis across units? But those the kinds of matters that can be handled locally and should be handled locally.

But it does raise those larger questions about culture. And of course, we just rolled this out in August and we're still getting people flying, so the culture question is ongoing, and Bob Brown formed just this fall a task force on understanding BU culture, and particularly the culture vis-a-vis these new remote work practices. And so that'll be like part two, right?What is our culture? How is remote work affecting that? You know, what are some of the pain points? What are some of the positives?

DOUG LEDERMAN: A couple of thousand, you said, people had already applied and gotten approved.

NATALIE MCKNIGHT: I think only about 10 percent have been denied.

DOUG LEDERMAN: That's of 2000 out of roughly how many staff...

NATALIE MCKNIGHT: About 6000.

DOUG LEDERMAN: I don't know if you've gotten granular enough to see patterns yet, like if there are more women than men because of childcare issues or other questions that are embedded in here. Is there anything that you can say about what you've seen so far that would help us understand how it's unfolding?

NATALIE MCKNIGHT: Those are great questions, and childcare definitely plays a huge role in this. I think we're so much in early days here, and the these applications are still coming in. My guess is the kind of analysis of the numbers that you're talking about will probably start happening in the spring semester. I know here in my unit, it's really worked out fine so far. I don't feel it's like a culture threat yet. And we did approve in two days for the one who applied for it, two days remote work. But we tried to make sure that people were going to be here on the days when have our fully unit meetings, right? So if you have a bunch of advisers and you know you want to have a weekly advising meeting, and it's going to be on this day, you don't approve that day for any of them.

DOUG LEDERMAN: I interested in the competitive landscape of things. How much of a factor in the committee's deliberations was the recognition that we're seeing a cultural shift toward demand for more work-life balance, and that failing to recognize it and respond to it would put BU at a competitive disadvantage?

NATALIE MCKNIGHT: Huge, huge motivating factor in having the committee and rolling out a policy, absolutely. I think even before we create this committee, and certainly while the committee was meeting, we were already having retention issues, because, you know, we're in Boston. There's a lot of competition, a lot of great universities in the area. And if some of them are offering remote work and you aren't, unless you're offering a ton more money--and even if you were offering a ton more money, you still might lose them because it's a quality of life issue, or it's the childcare, or just simply wanting to have more work-life balance even if you don't have children, we're seeing very much that if you want to hire and you want to retain, really, across the board in every single area, with technology particularly, then you're going to have to do this. You won't be a player if you don't. And even if you do offer it, it's tough out there.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Definitely. Do you consider this to be an almost perpetual issue going forward? If we'd all been playing closer attention, it was probably an emerging issue beforehand. But do you think that it's something that you're probably going to have to revisit pretty consistently? Do you think it's likely to be something that consistently sort of edges in a particular direction? Do you think we might sort of bounce back and forth? What's your sense of that?

NATALIE MCKNIGHT: I can't see going back to not having a remote work policy. I just don't see any signs that that would work well on any level, nor is there really a reason to do that. That said, some of the remote work applications were approved on a provisional basis, like for six months trial period. So a lot of people have done that, so that after six months they can kind of gauge is this actually working. And so

we will see some shifting, but I don't see shifting back to no remote work policy, because, again, I don't think you'd be able to hire, you wouldn't be able to retain, you wouldn't even be as productive. So I think that remote work is here to stay. I think if it evolves at all, it will be more remote work, not less. I see the next iteration of this being the four-day work week. I don't mean working at home one day a week. I mean, you work from home two days a week, you work here two days a week, and you have an additional day off every week. I think that's going to be the next one.

DOUG LEDERMAN: And that's addressing a related but slightly different issue of employee burnout, because all of us have been in a marathon that's been a sprint for the last 18 months, etc. And the sort of overall larger work-life balance issues that a lot of us wrestle with personally, as well as organizational. Yes, yeah, your hand is up too. When you think about those six month provisional acceptances, etc., what will you, what will supervisors judging those individual applications, and what would you as somebody looking across the institution be thinking about in terms of ultimately judging the impact of this, and the success of it, or lack thereof?

NATALIE MCKNIGHT: Right. Well, all jobs have certain responsibilities, tasks, and certainly the first line would be to assess did the tasks, the job part, get done, right? And did they get done well? So that has to be a supervisor's viewpoint on that. You know, in addition to that, it's maybe something a little bit more ephemeral, but communication. So this might be the biggest risk of that remote work, because I have occasionally seen some communication snafus, something missed in email, somebody said something in an email that maybe wasn't really clear, and if they just right next door, they might pop in and say, did you mean X? But because they're not right next door, they don't. They just go ahead and do something, and it was not the right thing. While I fully think that remote work is going to continue and we'll get probably more of it, communication issues are going to be something we really have to stay on top of, because I have seen a few dropped balls there.

DOUG LEDERMAN: And you think those issues are going to be visible enough that we'll be able to judge them?

NATALIE MCKNIGHT: To a degree. It'll be interesting. In my own college, I think working with the leadership team, I'm hoping to get us all to, if we can stop sprinting, and you're absolutely right, I use that metaphor all the time. We have been running a marathon like it's a sprint and everyone is just breathless, right? I think moving forward, if we are moving out of the pandemic, God willing, we're all going to have to slow down a little bit, right? I think that's going to be key to communication. We don't need to do things instantly, as soon as they hit your in-box, right? Pausing, the power of the pause as one of my associate deans always says, it's doing to need to be something we're going to need to roll

out more, or emphasize more in this remote work world so that people do take that moment to double-check, call somebody. I increasingly have people call me, because my in-box is a big mess. And if somebody calls me, I can just walk around my office, get some steps in, right? Because sometimes when you follow up with a call just to verify before you launch into something... But we're all in this sprint mode, so I've got to do it now, got to do it now. And that's not always the wisest thing to do. So I think we're going to have to slow down, catch a breath, and maybe be more deliberate and intentional about everything, and then I think the remote work will be fine. It's just because it's remote and we're sprinting, and we at some point stop sprinting.

VOICE: It's time to ditch paper processes. Too many of us are still drowning in paper, fixing printers, and chasing signatures. Formstack helps your teams automate manual processes, streamline student registration, and simplify enrollment, all without code. Learn why 27,000 organizations have turned to Formstack to help them reimagine their world of work. Go to formstack.com/ihe.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Here's our second conversation this week with Bryan Garey, vice president of human resources at Virginia Tech. Bryan, welcome to The Key and thanks for being here.

BRYAN GAREY: Thank you, thanks for having me.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Tell us a little bit about the current state of discussion around remote work at Virginia Tech.

BRYAN GAREY: Well, we've been talking about this subject of what I've framed as flexible work, which we can talk about in a bit, really since the new year, and we were still very much in the throes, deeply in the throes of pandemic. But, you know, there was a general sense, I had sense, and colleagues in Human Resources, that we needed to look ahead at the post-pandemic university workplace, in the workforce. And how do we actually capitalize on all that we learned from at that time almost a year of 80 percent of our population working 100 percent remote. And we all know the story. You know, within four weeks, we went from a largely in-person environment to a mostly remote environment. And I often joke with colleagues that if I had a million dollars and was asked to do a project to get 25 percent of the campus remote within a year, it was cost me a million and a half, and I'd have 10 percent remote in a year, and I'd still be working on it. But we did it in four weeks. So that's a long way of saying when I started talking about it in early in the year, honestly, people kind of rolled their eyes at me a little a bit. I mean, they were very kind and generous, as they are at Virginia Tech, but you could tell they were thinking, why are you talking about this? And, honestly, I think we were on the right track, and I think it helped us,

because we have been trying to challenge people to think about how can be harness what we've learned, and reimagine the workplace in a university environment while still supporting students as fully as we need to.

DOUG LEDERMAN: I used the word remote, you use flexible. Tell we what that distinction means, like I think I know where you're going to go, but...

BRYAN GAREY: It's a frame I like, because to me, flexible work, and it's not that complicated, but embraces certainly the where you work, this is where you get into remote or onsite work. But it also looks really differently at work schedules, and allowing people the flexibility to work at different times. It also really, I think, embraces a new paradigm about care giving and work. There used to be this real separation of, you know, you can't really have kids around or adults if you're caring for them. And certainly that can be a distraction and it's certainly not a no-holds barred sort of situation, but I think there's a greater tolerance and respect and understanding that people have fuller, richer lives. And so flexible work may be accommodating some care giving at times during the workday, allowing people to maybe work different shifts in the day, if it works for their job, in addition to working remotely or in a hybrid environment.

DOUG LEDERMAN: This is a big set of issues to explore. How do you and your colleagues at Virginia Tech about attacking the topic? What steps did you take?

BRYAN GAREY: We had obviously been tracking our workforce through the pandemic in terms of just trying to get our arms around where are people. That was something we did early, frankly, to be able to tell the story of the workforce through the pandemic, and it wasn't to monitor people, it was really just to get an understanding of where people are, and are we supporting the university through modified operations, and then that fall return that everybody did, that was sort of weird and strange, prevaccine, and everybody wanted to get things going again, and it was still fully remote. So we had some experience of outreach, data-gathering, kind of discussing practices of managing in a remote environment, and technological issues, and Zoom acclimation, all the things we all went through. And so we really started with a frame of saying, can we establish some guiding principles in our university, recognizing that like many universalities, it's highly decentralized in terms of decision making and culture.

And so I worked directly with our president and our senior leaders, and I said, look, I'd really want to kind of start some work and looking at the future of work at our university, but I want to do it looking at

some practices that we can have consistency, at least at the philosophical level. That's how it started, the then we broke it out by doing outreach at all of our colleges and units to really understand where have you been? What have you learned? Where do you want to be? And then we could share the guiding principles to say, hey, look, we're doing to give each dean or vice president the autonomy to determine their own strategy, but it will align around these guiding principles so that we can have some consistency across the very complex, large university.

And by and large, that's worked well, but as you would imagine, it's had its pros and cons, because you are going to have variation of approach, based on a leader. But candidly, I don't see any way to do it. A one size fits all approach is ultimately going to lead to everybody comes back, if you try to have one. That's the easy button, in my opinion. It's much harder to really try to live with the nuance and complexity of what I call flexible work, than it is to just say, I want everybody to get back. We'll figure it out later. Just come back, come back, come back. At lot of universities are doing that. My opinion is they're going to pay the price at this time of talent shortage and people really kind of reimagining their careers and their futures. And they're going to lose people.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Tell me a little bit about what the principles are, and you just touched on one of them, but what would you say are the biggest reasons why flexible work is essential for a place like Virginia Tech?

BRYAN GAREY: Well, I'll start with the latter. I mean, I think flexible work's essential, one, because the cat is out of the bag, the genii is out of the bottle, pick whatever metaphor you want. We had a year of working remotely and we were able to by and large keep operations going, and you can't just unwind all of that, and say, okay, we're done. Crisis is over. Let's get back to the way it was before the pandemic. Because all the studies you see out there is that there's a gap right now what faculty and staff want, and they want more flexibility. They want to preserve some of what they've enjoyed and learned through working from home. So I don't think we have the choice to retreat.

I also think the data shows that people are more engaged and more productive. I believe in more hybridized environments. The data's sort of starting to come out there. It doesn't mean that fully remote can't work and doesn't have advantages. I think for most universities, for most roles that have any flexibility at all, we have to acknowledge that a good third of our roles have no flexibility. They're either operational or they're doctors in a clinic, and they're doing to be onsite. You know, that's just the nature of our operation. So that's why it's important.

Some of our guiding principles, they're not that revolutionary, but we wanted to basically say we are going to explore these concepts. Our leadership says that's important. And other is the we believe that leaders make decisions and the leaders are ultimately going to decide a strategy for their college and units. The other is flexible work means it's going to be fluid, flexible, changing, that we don't land in a spot and it's forever. Flexible work also means that you can be asked to come on site even if you're in a fully remote environment, that onsite is important, things like that. They're fairly high level, but they at least ground us in a common approach.

DOUG LEDERMAN: What are the biggest potential cons of remote work? Are most of them cultural or operational, related to productivity? What have been the pushback or the arguments you've gotten that have been most persuasive or up to a point about limits of this?

BRYAN GAREY: Sure. Well that's a great question. I think there are a lot of cons. They're legitimate cons. I think it's what we have to kind of work through.

One is familiarity, obviously, people are more familiar with having people around, and that's what they liked and they missed it. And they were afraid, we all were afraid during the pandemic, and we're less afraid now. And so people just want to go back to that. So some of it is, I'm just more comfortable with one way. So that's a tough change to navigate.

The other is, it's a lot harder to lead through a lot of different schedules and modalities. You can't lead the same way, and let's face it, we probably didn't have great leadership to begin with in places. Leadership is hard, it's complex. Supervisory skills are hard to master. It's very difficult to be good at being a leader no matter what, and now we're asking leaders to deal with people that are at home, or they're working odd hours, or they're in and out, and they're doing hybrids. So it's very easy to go, I'm tired of this. This is too hard. Let's just get everybody back here to the way it was.

I do think it's harder for people, even as an individual contributor level, you have to take more active role of communications, relationship building. Everybody's got to change the way they work for it to work well. And we're not there yet. So a lot of people just kind of want to throw the baby out with the bathwater in my opinion, and say, this is ridiculous. It's not going to last. We're all going to go back to the way it was, and let's just do it now.

DOUG LEDERMAN: One question that has perplexed me a little bit is this whole question of productivity.

Most people if asked believe they were as productive if not more in certain ways, and just talking to the folks at BU, who were talking about the average two hours of commuting that they no longer have when they're remote, etc. And you probably don't have quite that problem in Blacksburg, but how does a place like Virginia Tech think about and assess to the extent that is part of your equation, employee productivity?

BRYAN GAREY: We get asked a lot about it. And, of course, the flip and cynical answer that I give is how good were we at measuring productivity before the pandemic?

DOUG LEDERMAN: What are we compared to what? [CROSSTALK] [UNCLEAR]

BRYAN GAREY: The answer is we're not very good at measuring productivity. Because they you could say, well, let's measure it the same way, and we'll see if we're more or less productive. It's still a fair question and just a kind of flip response. I mean, I think it's really hard assessing someone's productivity.

I actually think this is a big opening that could happen with flexible work is, so this is going to be a little out there, so we can come back to the present. But I really believe that over time as this evolves and matures, it's really going to force each of us as individual employees, faculty and staff members, to have a really good grasp of the value that we bring in our role. Because that value is not going to be just because I'm there and showing up. There is a lot in that that we'll have to replace, because we need relationship building. And I do believe hybrids are important.

But I think in some ways it could create an opportunity for us to really take a deeper look at, okay, you're job is to be communication specialist. What does that really mean? What do you do? What do you produce? How do you add value? Then we can account for that, not so much are you in, are you out, are you working late, are you working in the morning? You're either fulfilling the potential as designed or you're not. And hopefully, you're doing it happily and you feel connected, and you're part of the culture, and all those things that are important. So that's like four steps away.

I do think we need to get back to basics in many ways and really reimagine communications, setting expectations, having regular touch points, all those managerial 101 points that we don't do very well anyway, that you have to do intentionally. I can't tell you how many people who still don't talk to their people on a regular basis. They don't carve out time to say, how are you doing? What's going on? What's going well? How can I help you? They took for granted that they'd run into each other in the work place.

Frankly, they didn't, but they let it be a possibility. And now they're not, and then they say, well, I don't see Doug at all. I don't know what he's doing. And I'm like, well, have you talked to him? Well, you know, we're busy.

DOUG LEDERMAN: How clearly are you differentiating between staff and faculty in your thinking about this? The BU folks we just talked to focused on staff because they viewed faculty are already working remote and flexible schedules by and large. Do your principles apply across the board?

BRYAN GAREY: We made a really clear distinction between academic faculty, and we have many different types of faculty, as many universities do, because we kind of recognize that academic faculty, your traditional tenured and research faculty, kind of have the most flexible work environment even prepandemic. And that at time, we were trying, and have successfully done so, of doing more in person sort of student experiences in the classroom.

But beyond that expectation that was set by the provost, the academic faculty have a pretty flexible situation, their work hours, they can even do meetings by Zoom. Faculty meetings are often done virtually. People come and go. They do their research and service in different ways. So we kind of set those aside, because those are part of the culture. We believe they'll continue and that that'll morph in its own world, and pedagogy may change, and different hybrid teaching models will emerge. And all that's great. We partner with the provost and support that where we can. So we then carved out our staff and our administrative and professional faculty, to call faculty are more staff-like, and that's about 5500 folks at Virginia Tech. And we're all over the state, in every county, and the District of Columbia as well as Roanoke, and really focus this work on them.

DOUG LEDERMAN: I read that you have some pilot projects going to test out some possible models. Can you give a sense of what some of those are and how they may point the way forward?

BRYAN GAREY: About 85 percent of our IT organization is remote. That's an interesting experiment, and that's the most remote we've seen in any group, and may ever see in any group. Our advancement group is really looking, and this is the fundraisers, some call it development, are really looking at hoteling spaces and really changing how they schedule together time, recognizing that much of their work is done outside of the campus. Engineering is focusing on advising and some of the student services in that college. So we're running alongside our partners that are doing that work, and at the same time... And so that's sort of one part of the work.

The other part is we built what we call solutions teams to start really thinking ahead about the core areas that are going to feed us for the long term--technology, space, policies, benefits and wellness, out of state employment, big, big deal, and we haven't quite figured that out yet. That's an entire body of work. the training and development, teaching, outreach, learning. And so that's where we are now.

You know, Delta kind of put everything in a limbo state where we were kind of headed. We really had a successful semester, really grateful and pleased, I mean. And so that' good news for Virginia Tech, as for many of our universities. But in terms of some of these future work settling, I think Delta hasn't progressed that. So I believe it's doing to be another year or two before we settle into something that we can say is stable. And honestly, that I think poses a real challenge, because employees want, they want to be done with this. They want to know, what I do right now is the way it's going to be forever. And you've got to say, no, we're not done. Leaders are done with it. They want to know when is everybody going to come back largely, and so we're kind of living in the tension.

DOUG LEDERMAN: So have you, like in our previous conversation with BU, actually approved new remote or flexible work arrangements?

BRYAN GAREY: We did launch a flexible work agreement form, that is, it's an automated process where it's really for a manager and employee theoretically to talk, then to document their work plans for an interval that they put into the agreement. And then it's automated to remind them when the agreement's expiring, and then we can pull data from the agreement. Not everybody's adopted the agreement, but of the 5500 in this pool, we've got over 2000 agreements filed. And a third of those are 100 percent remote So we know that we have probably close to 10 percent, more than 10 percent of the 5500, but almost 10 percent of the entire workforce, is 100 remote, probably 40 to 50 percent have some kind of work agreement. And many have yet to document it.

DOUG LEDERMAN: And would you say you probably don't necessarily have comparable information, but would you say that those numbers are up significantly from three years ago, say? I mean, in other words...

BRYAN GAREY: Oh yeah! [CROSSTALK] Oh my goodness...

DOUG LEDERMAN: So this is really....

BRYAN GAREY: It's radically different.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Change has come.

BRYAN GAREY: This is in no way to disparage our university, I think this is common for more universities. We all sort of did lip service to the idea of flexible work, where, you know, the state would come out and say, we support remote work, and then nobody would do it. Or you'd feel really good if maybe one day every month you to work from home, and then people thought, you know, you we're working at all. I mean, it was all these stereotypes and sentiments about it.

DOUG LEDERMAN: So it really is total before and after to some extent...

BRYAN GAREY: I think so. And yet we're not done, meaning, I don't know if it will be more or less than that. You know, I really do believe that in the future we're going to mostly land in the world of the hybrid and we're going to probably understand through data and experience what hybrids work best for which organizations, and which departments. I think we're going to need to have intentionality around these in ways that we aren't right now. And I think that's where a lot of critics come in, is they think, well, it's not working for me. I don't know where my people ar. I don't know what they're doing.

Of course, well, there's something you can do about that. Maybe you schedule a day where everybody's in together, and you have some meetings in person that are very intentioenal, or you have one-on-ones in person, again, assuming it's safe to do so, and it is safer now to do that with vaccinations and the reduction of that prevalence of the disease. But that takes intentionality that we haven't had before because everybody was just here, and you'd have a meeting, and the only way you had a meeting was in person.

What I'm interested in seeing, and who knows where we'll land because it's... I know it's not going to be like it is today. And it's not like it's going to be like in the pandemic, and it's not to be like it was before the pandemic. We still don't exactly know where we're going to be. But the element that I'm fascinated by, because not only do we have just coming out of this pandemic, hopefully, never has the employee been as powerful as they are right now in our lifetime. So it is an employee in a market. So who is...

Some folks are going to have to flight and attrition before they realize we either have to pay more, which people are realizing that. Two, that it's not just pay. Everybody wants to say it's only just pay. We all know this. It's about engagement, supervision, belonging, sense of mission, feeling that work is valuable, that you're getting valued for the work you do and appreciation, things that we all know about but not enough people do.

DOUG LEDERMAN: And there is an increased interest among people my kids' age in that greater work-life balance. It's become an overused phrase, but I think that expectation. And that's why I think your focus on flexibility is probably the right one. It's not that people want to work less hard, they just want to work differently, and they do want to have more control. And that's hard for us as employers sometimes to grapple with.

BRYAN GAREY: I think that's right on, Doug.It's not that people don't want to work. I think that is often what is a stereotype. We are seeing a demographic change, which is another interesting element. I mean, that millennial generation, which are now turning 40, and then the Generation Z, or whatever it gets labeled, they have a different relationship to work. And they're digital natives and they're willing work on their phone or in the evening, and they also want to be able to break away and do things. And in many ways, they could teach us older people, I'm a Gen Xer, to not necessarily be wedded to a, I'm only working if I'm behind my desk or in my office a certain amount of time.

DOUG LEDERMAN: That was Bryan Garey, vice president for human resources at Virginia Tech. Thanks to him and to Boston University's Natalie McKnight for helping us understand the evolving landscape of work. These are issues that all of us are going to be dealing with for years to come and the implications are huge for our organizations, for ourselves and our families, and for society. Every once in a while it hits me just how much the last 20 months of pandemic and recession and upheaval over race have altered our world, often for the worse, but occasionally, we have to hope, for the better as well. This is one of those realms in which I see a potential silver lining if we do a little rebalancing of our lives to work smarter and better.

That's all for this week's episode of The Key. In addition to our guests, thanks to Formstack for its support for this episode, and, as always, to all of you for listening. I'm Doug Lederman, and until next week, stay well and stay safe.

[MUSIC]