Proposal on Remote Work

Tequila Sunset (Dallas)

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Contents

1 Introduction

I am proposing an experiment of 6 to 12 months to learn through practice the viability of remote work for full time national staff as an alternative to relocating.

In the Standing Committee Meeting Summation in IB 9-6, it states:

> One very important use of organizational money in the coming period will be the expansion of the number of paid positions of the center. The Standing Committee is making preparations to bring on several members of the Standing Committee on as paid, full-time political leaders for our organization over the next six months: the SC member from Dallas, the SC member from Tampa, and the Political Secretary. The comrades who are not currently located in the Twin Cities will relocate there in order to work collectively out of our headquarters.

With additional full-timers, the Center will be able to make a real leap, providing more active political and organizational leadership for our rapidly growing group. We want to do more, and we will do more. This will be a great advance in building revolutionary organization.

In principle, I fully unify with the goals of the Center to strengthen the national work by bringing on the two members of the SC as full time organizers. What motivates this proposal is a disagreement of purely practical matters, particularly on the necessity of the full time organizers to be geographically located in the Twin Cities.

I will explain why I think this is worthwhile by analyzing the job functions of national staff, addressing the question of productivity in remote work, showing benefits the organization can reap from remote work, and discussing what the implementation of software to facilitate remote work may look like.

Let's get down to business.

2   The Job Description

The most comprehensive explanation I could find of what the duties of our full time organizers would be is the "National Organizer job description and role" document from CB 9-5, December 2021.

That document lays out the following tasks. These are directly copied from the document, but I've numbered them for easy reference:

1. Work on the General Membership, keeping in contact with general members who call in, including making sure they are in a single data base, ensuring general members are paying dues, sending out email every 2 months to maintain some sort of political life. They could organize a yearly phone bank (or do it themselves) for general membership fundraising.

2. Developing materials for national campaigns (making sure there are signs and banners for events like May Day) that Districts have the option of using. Under guidance from SC, preparing documents / instructions about how such materials might be used.

3. Answering routine correspondence from people who reach out to group, including answering phone calls and keeping records of such activities.

4. Working with Districts on projects as assigned.

5. Assisting with our press work and web sites as assigned.

6. Maintaining office, develop filing systems, and procedures for handling files/data. Deal with routine office problems.

7. Prepare drafts of documents on internal issues, or issues of the day (under direction from the Center).

8. Needs to move to Twin Cities.

9. Can travel as assigned.

10. If the person has data management skills - we can set up electronic petitions, gather names for mass organizations, and will when appropriate pay for this kind of work.

11. Provide logistical support for national meetings / events

The above job description is over two and a half years old now, but the description from Section 4.5 of the Standing Committee Meeting Summation from IB 9-7, June 2024, seems to broadly align with the above tasks:

> The comrades will also be devoting more time to their roles as members of the Standing Committee, providing leadership to districts, commissions, and the organization as a whole. Some of the additional responsibilities that these comrades will be taking up would include the extra work of scheduled calls with membership applicants, our newspaper work which continually grows in volume, fundraising, visits to districts and new areas, and more.

The members of the SC already carry out their duties remotely - and based on these descriptions, most of the functions of a National Organizer (I will abbreviate this as NO) are done on a computer, and don't necessitate being located in one specific locale; one could accomplish most of these tasks anywhere they have access to a laptop and internet.

Tasks 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 10 are all tasks that can easily be done from anywhere with access to a computer and internet. Task 9 doesn't depend on the NO working out of the Twin Cities; they can travel just as effectively from anywhere in the country. Task 11 could benefit from being in person, but it depends on if the meeting/event is in the Twin Cities. If it isn't, then it makes no difference where the NO is located. If it is, there are comrades who are already in the Twin Cities who can take on aspects of planning which necessitate being physically located in the city, and the NO who is working remotely can take on other aspects.

Task 6 is the only task which explicitly can't be done without being in person. This task is vague and I don't have a concrete understanding of what this entails, but if there are a handful of tasks that must be done in person, those tasks can be distributed to the comrades who are already located in the Twin Cities, and other tasks can be distributed to the remote comrades accordingly.

Task 8 is a job requirement, rather than a task that the NO will be carrying out on the job.

Tasks 1, 3, and 4 are tasks which necessitate communicating with people who aren't located physically in the Twin Cities, and therefore do not benefit from being in the office at all.

3 Productivity

There is an idea that working remotely is less productive compared to working in person, even if the tasks of a job are practical to complete remotely. This idea is taken as an eternal truth, but reality is more complicated.

While remote work has been around for most of this century, it didn't seriously take off until the pandemic, which "triggered a mass social experiment in working arrangements",[1] as workplaces were forced to adopt fully remote work en masse. This represents a unique opportunity for researchers. Prior to the pandemic, there simply wasn't much data available to study about remote work, but the pandemic triggered a surge in research. Thus far, studies vary in their conclusions - there is far from a conclusive scientific answer on the effects of working from home (WFH) on productivity.

Unfortunately, there is no data to analyze on the effect of remote work on revolutionary organizations. These studies are primarily focused on capitalist enterprises, and thus there are qualitative differences between their goals and the goals of our organization. However, it would be a mistake

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[1] Barrero, Bloom, and Davis, "The Evolution of Work from Home", p. 25.

of one-sidedness to use that as a reason to ignore what we can learn from them. Stalin recognized this when he said "The combination of Russian revolutionary sweep with American efficiency is the essence of Leninism in Party and state work".[2] While we should recognize the primary aspect that businesses operate in service of the bourgeoisie, we can acknowledge the secondary aspect of businesses having significant experience in experimenting with workplace arrangements - in this case experience with remote work - and take away what is useful for us.

Productivity in mental labor is a notoriously difficult metric to measure. Studies which rely on workers' self-evaluations broadly report higher employee productivity and job satisfaction when WFH.[3] Studies which attempt to quantify individual productivity of workers when working from home have mixed conclusions.[4] Rather than look at individual productivity, Ding and Ma ("Return-to-Office Mandates") take the approach of assessing the effect of remote work on overall firm performance. Their analysis of S&P 500 firms which mandated workers to return to the office (RTO) suggest no meaningful performance improvement from workers switching from WFH to in office work.[5] Chen, Benedikt Frey, and Presidente ("Disrupting Science") analyzes remote scientific research teams and observes a positive correlation between scientific breakthroughs and remote work starting from 2010 onward, crediting the emergence of "key remote work technologies"[6] like Slack and Zoom.

In understanding the particularities of remote working arrangements and the factors involved which may have influenced productivity, we can sum up these experiences, learn what worked well, learn what obstacles we may experience in implementing remote work, and come up with solutions that apply to the needs of our organization. All of this is to say that we shouldn't be viewing the question of productivity in remote work metaphysically. Things are constantly changing, technology is evolving, and conditions are developing. Understanding the role that remote work can play in our organization must be learned through practice.

4   Costs of In Person

While productivity is a major factor, it cannot be considered in a vacuum, independent of other contradictions at play in the question of remote work.

4.1   Office Space

In the Central Committee Meeting Summation from IB 9-7, June 2024, it states:

> Our available funds could support these staff expenditures for more than year. But to make employing a number of people sustainable, and to continue to expand our capacity, we also need to improve our dues collection and fundraising.

Improving our dues collection and fundraising is good, but in addition to that, cost saving measures can make the organization's money go farther. Adopting remote work would be more economical and make scaling up our national staff more affordable, as it would eliminate the cost of in-person office space, which is only going to get more expensive as the organization brings on more national staff and physical space needs increase.

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[2]Stalin, *The Foundations of Leninism*, IX. Style in Work.
[3]Ding and Ma, "Return-to-Office Mandates", pp. 7–12.
[4]Ding and Ma, "Return-to-Office Mandates", pp. 12–13.
[5]Ding and Ma, "Return-to-Office Mandates", p. 27.
[6]Chen, Benedikt Frey, and Presidente, "Disrupting Science", p. 4.

4.2   Hiring

Offering remote work to national staff would also expand the pool of people to hire. Eliminating the need to move would make working for the organization full time a realistic prospect for comrades who may otherwise not consider it due to the financial or personal costs of relocating, or for comrades who may have disabilities that would be obstacles to working in person.

4.3   Commute and Move Time

Barrero, Bloom, and Davis ("The Evolution of Work from Home") stress the positive impact of a lack of a daily commute.[7] In many cases, no commute means more time available to work on a daily basis, or otherwise more time to deal with errands, household chores, or leisure.

In our case, there's more time cost than just the commute. The initial time investment that comrades would need to spend in order to uproot their lives and move to the Twin Cities - scouting new places to live, planning the logistics of the move, packing, physically moving, unpacking, and settling in - is a significant time investment which must factor into the equation.

Moving is also a stressful process - in fact, in a survey of 1000 Americans who have moved within the last three years, "45 percent of respondents said moving is by far the most stressful event in life",[8] and stress is shown to have a significant negative impact on productivity.[9]

If comrades were already located in the Twin Cities, then the tradeoffs to work in the office are minimal. But in order to make an accurate comparison, we must consider these particular costs of in person work.

4.4   Impact on Dallas

The previous costs I've pointed out apply in the question of remote work *in general*. A particular cost to the Dallas district is the loss of the spouse of the Dallas SC member.

She has been the primary force behind NAARPR Dallas' bail fund, which we used to support advanced actions in the Palestine movement. She also took the initiative in getting NAARPR Dallas a grant, and did the bulk of the work in finding an office space, which has been of indispensable value - not just to NAARPR Dallas, but to the district and mass organizations that we have relationships with. This comrade also has historically handled important infrastructure for the NAARPR Dallas, like the website, mailing lists, and finances.

She will almost certainly be an asset in the Twin Cities, but the Twin Cities is not lacking veteran comrades. Dallas is newer. We are growing fast, but we have few veteran comrades. While the work would continue on regardless, and we are building the capacity to take over her current responsibilities, losing her from Dallas will have a notable impact, not just on our police crimes work, but on the district and the local work as a whole.

I bring this up to say, while the need to strengthen national work takes priority over the interests of the local district, allowing remote work still strengthens the national work while minimizing the trade-offs that would come from requiring the SC comrade and her spouse to move.

5   Adaptation

I talked about costs of in person work. What costs are there for remote work?

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[7]Barrero, Bloom, and Davis, "The Evolution of Work from Home", p. 41.

[8]SWNS, *Some People Claim This Is More Stressful than Marriage, Divorce and Even Having Kids*.

[9]Bui et al., "Workplace Stress and Productivity".

The controversies and disagreements surrounding the productivity effects of work from home reflect the complex nature of the issue. Jobs and tasks differ greatly in their suitability for remote work, as do workers, managerial styles, and workplace cultures. Thus, there is no sound reason to expect the productivity effects of remote work to be uniform across jobs, workers, managers, and organizations. In addition, communications, performance evaluations, and management practices must adapt to new working arrangements, if they are to work well. Adaptation often requires new skills, perhaps especially for managers.[10]

So, the adaptation process is a cost, though this is primarily a factor when transitioning from an in person arrangement to a remote one. In our particular circumstances, the members of the SC who would become national staff are already remote, and will remain so for the months leading up to their moves - data suggests no significant performance improvements on a firm level when switching from a WFH arrangement to an in person arrangement.[11]

My understanding is that the center primarily uses Signal to communicate. If we were to formally adopt remote work, it would be worthwhile to optimize for remote work by investing time into learning software tools better suited for it than Signal alone. The time spent acclimating to those new tools is our "adaptation process". Signal has a lot of value in our work thanks to it being a user-friendly means of encrypted communication, but it has limitations - the functionality that Signal offers is essentially equivalent to something like SMS or WhatsApp.

In office and remote workplaces, software to facilitate communications which offers more advanced functionality than Signal is commonplace. Providing specific suggestions for what software to use is out of scope for this particular document; I can't precisely recommend software that national staff should be using without having a thorough understanding of the particulars of how the work is carried out. Instead, I'll give an overview of what software is typically used in office and remote workplaces, and a non-exhaustive set of privacy conscious alternatives which provide similar functionality, but are open source and offer encryption. A deeper evaluation of what software in particular to use can be done if this proposal is accepted.

5.1 Real-time messaging

Slack and Microsoft Teams are common and offer more sophisticated functionality than Signal. Imagine if you could group your chats into folders by topic. In simple terms, that is what Slack or Teams do. Element is the most popular option that is encrypted and open source, but Zulip and Nextcloud Talk are other options.

To explain the benefit, I'll use Dallas as an example. In Dallas we have multiple FRSO signal groups which represent the complex life of the district. One for organizing discussion that's relevant to the whole district, one for more general political discussion, one for off-topic socializing, and each unit has it's own chat. Then we have mass group chats, and some mass groups even have multiple chats. NAARPR Dallas has a general chat, a chat specifically to coordinate tabling, an announcements chat, and various chats that spring up around specific projects. We have chats for coalitions that we're involved in, and sometimes even those chats have auxiliary chats to coordinate specific areas of work, like research or outreach.

This creates a phenomenon that I've observed among comrades that I like to call "Signal Overwhelm" - when we are involved in so many things that it becomes difficult to keep up with the fire hose of incoming communications on Signal. That's what something like Element would help

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[10]Barrero, Bloom, and Davis, "The Evolution of Work from Home", p. 39.
[11]Ding and Ma, "Return-to-Office Mandates", p. 26.

solve. In Element you have "spaces", and each space has a number of "rooms", each of which is analogous to a single Signal group chat. So related rooms are grouped under a single space, which makes managing incoming communications much more manageable. To continue with the Dallas example, all of NAARPR Dallas' chats would be grouped into a "NAARPR Dallas" space, various FRSO chats can be grouped into it's own space, etc.

5.2 Email and Calendar

Microsoft Outlook is pretty standard in the workplace. It's an email client, but also offers functionality to view colleagues' calendars, and schedule meetings at times where they are available. It lets you reference multiple people's calendars quickly to find a time where everyone is available. Sometimes Gmail and Google Calendar are used for similar purposes.

Alternatives include Nextcloud Groupware, or Proton Mail and Proton Calendar.

5.3 Conference Calls

We are all familiar with conferencing software after the pandemic. Zoom is one of the most popular, and Slack and MS Teams include this functionality built in. The best open source and encrypted option for this is Jitsi Meet.

5.4 File Sharing and Document Collaboration

Sharing files and document collaboration is a common need in the workplace. I'm confident that we're all familiar with Google Drive. Workplaces sometimes use Microsoft's OneDrive instead.

For file storage, encrypted and open source options include Nextcloud Files, Proton Drive, and CryptPad. For document collaboration, there is Nextcloud Office, Proton Docs, and CryptPad.

6 Conclusion and Recommendation

As Marxist-Leninists, we are scientists. While I have provided a defense of remote work, determining if remote work is truly effective for national staff can only be determined through practice, and that practice must include concrete and conscious experimentation. This would mean creating a plan for remote work, identifying obstacles as they come up, and investigating solutions to these problems.

There are clear benefits to remote work, and adopting it could be beneficial to our organization, which is why I am proposing a 6 to 12 month experiment to determine the effectiveness of remote work for our organization through practice.

7 References

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