

Broadband Access Can Boost Rural Jobs, Remote Work

By Sarah Dolezal

January 17, 2023

As working from home has become the new normal over the last three years due to the coronavirus pandemic, there's now a greater need to adopt fiber broadband Internet services, otherwise known as high-speed Internet, in rural areas. High-speed Internet can make it possible for rural residents to find jobs and work from home, and employers may have better results hiring, onboarding and retaining workers in regions outside metropolitan areas.

According to an Information Technology and Innovation Foundation report (https://itif.org/publications/2022/12/05/state-of-us-broadband-in-2022-reassessing-the-whole-picture/?mc_cid=969131e48e&mc_eid=2c64b5d08f), "Rural coverage usually lags behind urban coverage because rural areas are less densely populated and, therefore, more expensive to serve per household." In 2019, only 62 percent of the U.S. population had adopted fiber broadband Internet service, even though 98 percent of households can access high-speed Internet.

The recruitment process for rural job candidates takes extra time and effort for businesses because they need to educate—and possibly support—those candidates for remote work, said Tonya Mead, CEO of Search Remotely, a remote company that recruits remote workers across the globe. Meanwhile, job candidates in metropolitan areas do not experience the same issues with Internet connections, so the recruitment process is smoother and faster than it is for rural populations.

Mead said some of her clients didn't hire some rural workers because those prospective employees had weak Internet connections.

"When interviewing rural candidates for remote jobs, [my clients] often experience static, dropped lines, frozen screens, voice and video misalignment," Mead said. "Clients have turned down rural remote candidates because of their unstable Internet connection."

"You're limited with what you can do at home if you don't have high-speed Internet," said Ryan McCowan, chief technology officer for the Americas and assistant vice president for portfolio strategy at ADTRAN, a provider of open, disaggregated networking and communications equipment headquartered in Huntsville, Ala. "The rural areas are either using digital subscriber line, which is slow, or not having any Internet service at all."

McCowan noted that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) defines broadband or high-speed Internet as having at least 25Mbps download speed (from the Internet to the user) and 3Mbps upload speed (from the user to the Internet), written as 25/3. If a household or company has nothing, the FCC considers them to be *unserved*; if a household or company has less than 25/3, then the FCC considers them *underserved*.

McCowan said that if a company or household stores files in the cloud or conducts videoconferencing, then the FCC recommends that they have 25/3 Internet speed so that multiple tasks can be performed at once without slowing down the online workflow.

"If you have poor Internet speed [at home or in the office], you will have slowness and problems with videoconferencing, and you don't have enough speed to do two things at once," McCowan said. "If you work from home, you need enough speed to take a video call while someone else might stream movies."

Adoption rates in rural areas may go up, however, as the work-from-home trend continues and more people gravitate to rural areas with high-speed Internet: Forty-seven percent of rural moves are to areas with fiber broadband Internet, according to the Fiber Broadband Association (<https://www.fiberbroadband.org/d/do/4444>).

A 2021 study published in the *International Science Review* (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/01600176211018749>) explained that "rural broadband internet expansion into rural areas has been linked to rural income, job, and productivity growth, particularly in metropolitan-adjacent rural areas."

Lawmakers Fund High-Speed Internet Across America

In 2021, Congress passed the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/bipartisan-infrastructure-law/>), allocating \$65 billion for states and municipalities to deploy fiber broadband Internet to unserved or underserved populations. Specifically, the new law funnels \$46.5 billion (<https://connectednation.org/current-broadband-funding/>) through the Broadband, Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) program (https://broadbandusa.ntia.doc.gov/sites/default/files/2022-10/DOC_NTIA_Workforce%20Planning%20Guide_FINAL_100722.pdf) at the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to supply more robust Internet service to these populations.

Angela Thi Bennett, digital equity director at the NTIA, said that being able to provide a high-speed Internet connection for people who seek employment is vital to building a robust workforce.

"Recruitment is a huge component to achieving [employment] equity," Bennett said. "Ensuring that people who need the jobs are getting connected to the jobs is part of our robust workforce development priority at NTIA."

High-speed Internet connections can connect people who may have challenges with transportation, child care or mobility to better-paying job opportunities, Bennett said.

For example, before joining the NTIA, Bennett helped a woman in Ohio land a job working from home processing unemployment claims for the state of Tennessee. She had turned down a previous job offer because she faced long bus rides and inconvenient child care.

"The [BEAD program] is about creating good jobs, and to make sure that those who are unserved or underserved have access to those good jobs," Bennett said.

HR DAILY NEWSLETTER

News, trends and analysis, as well as breaking news alerts, to help HR professionals do their jobs better each business day.

SUBSCRIBE

CONTACT US (WWW.SHRM.ORG/ABOUT-SHRM/PAGES/CONTACT-US.ASPX) | 800.283.SHRM
(7476)

Monday - Friday 8:00 am–8:00 pm ET

© 2023 SHRM. All Rights Reserved

SHRM provides content as a service to its readers and members. It does not offer legal advice, and cannot guarantee the accuracy or suitability of its content for a particular purpose.

Disclaimer (www.shrm.org/about-shrm/Pages/Terms-of-Use.aspx#Disclaimer)

Feedback