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MAJOR SHIFTS IN MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT



As news of the COVID-19 Pandemic outbreak was unfolding in late February and early March 2020 none of us knew what substantial and sustaining societal shifts we were going to experience. Even today this story has not ended and will not for most of us for years to come. Some of these shifts, shaking a colleague's hand, have had an immediate impact on our connection with people, while others true impact has yet to be experienced.

BACKGROUND

As news of the COVID-19 Pandemic outbreak was unfolding in late February and early March 2020 none of us knew what substantial and sustaining societal shifts we were going to experience. Even today this story has not ended and will not for most of us for years to come. Some of these shifts, shaking a colleague's hand, have had an immediate impact on our connection with people, while others true impact has yet to be experienced.

Purely from a municipality's perspective there have been 5 Major Shifts identified. These 5 Major Shifts are meant to some degree as a road map for possible directions municipalities can take as a path through COVID-19 Pandemic. These shifts are not set in stone, little is right now, and may themselves shift over time.

The 5 Major Shifts Impacting Municipalities:

- Disrupted Routines
- Less Face-to-Face
- Remote Working
- Decline in Local Media
- Refocused on Community

Before we continue with the road map, a few words about your navigator, Kent Waugh, Managing Partner, The W Group.

- 35+ years of working closely with municipal governments, providing survey research, strategy support services, and consulting.
- Conducted observations and research into societal changes over the same time span.

- Discussions with numerous Canadian municipality leaders prior to, and especially during, the COVID-19 Pandemic.
- Currently, on behalf of Municipal World, Kent is conducting the State of Canadian Municipalities Amid COVID-19.

The W Group assists municipalities in building long-term community engagement capacity by focusing on securing residents' ongoing involvement. Primarily, we are a professional services support firm providing the following services to municipalities on either a fixed rate, per hour, or estimate basis. We also provide specialized consulting services on a variety of solutions. All of our work is designed specifically for Canadian municipalities. Visit [The W Group](#) for more information.

- E-Learning Courses - Eliminate the need for classroom time by enabling employees to complete independent online training and education.
- Digital Forms Design & Delivery - Reduce in-person contact and streamline information flow
- E-Communications - E-newsletters that help municipalities reach, inform, educate and engage residents.
- Survey Research Services -Survey design, fielding and reporting along with community engagement research panel development (we also support engagement activities Bang the Table).
- Customer Feedback Programs - Gain feedback from customers to ensure they are comfortable with the City's facilities COVID-19 safety measures and ongoing reopening efforts.

#1 DISRUPTED ROUTINES

Many envision routine as something that brings us comfort in our lives. Do you always put on our right shoe first, or take the same route to work, or park in the same area of a shopping centre and use the same entrance door even though you visit stores throughout different areas of the mall? Habits or routines are comforting and losing these routines can make us feel 'out of sorts' or disconnected.

Have you ever taken the same route to work and then later can't remember the drive? If so, you have experienced the state of beta brainwaves; the everyday waking state. Your beta brainwaves may have helped on your drive to work but may be less helpful once you arrive. Researchers say true innovation comes from gamma brainwaves when our consciousness is at a higher level. Stepping out of your everyday routine with tools like meditation can trigger this shift from beta to gamma and help spark innovation.

"A gamma wave results from the state of consciousness that exists above the everyday waking state of beta brainwaves."

Impacts of Disrupted Routines:

- Stress & Mental Health
- General Loss of Connectedness
- Opportunity for Innovation

Disrupted routines have given most of us an uneasy feeling about the present and future. For some, it has turned on light bulbs of innovation, whether for new products/services, processes, or programs (online exercise courses increased during the pandemic). We can leverage disrupted routines to bring about wholesale changes to everyday



activities. This is a rare opportunity to try new approaches without fear of failure because the intent is clearly understood.

The notion of innovation during a period of severe disruption is well expressed by one senior municipal manager. The following statement was part of a preliminary survey leading up to the Joint Municipal World and The W Group's Survey on State of Canadian Municipalities Amidst COVID-19.

"Evidence suggests that many leaders are putting the pandemic to good use by using the current situation as an opportunity to have tough conversations on policy, budget or historic trends that would otherwise not be given the same administrative or political attention. The attitude of "don't let a good crisis go to waste" is being applied to many areas of our municipal business. When the dust finally settles on COVID-19, we may find ourselves - organizationally - in a much better place."

Interim results indicate that the majority of Canadian municipal staff surveyed agree with this statement for their own municipality or department. There is still a large window of opportunity to make improvements and changes to help you improve how your municipality operates.

So much disruption makes it easier to question the effectiveness of some of those “well, we’ve always done it this way” processes and programs. Many municipalities are leveraging this unfortunate crisis by changing the ways they operate. The next two shifts highlight two significant changes in how municipalities are managing their way through the pandemic. Less Face-to-Face and Remote Working.

*Beta versus Gamma <https://medium.com/live-your-life-on-purpose/achieving-the-highest-level-of-awareness-3adb9f3ef883>



#2 LESS FACE-TO-FACE

The reduction of in-person connections has been one of the most dramatic shifts across society. Humans are social creatures by nature and the loss of personal connection is triggering stress and mental health concerns for many.

There are several notions that come up when we talk about having less face-to-face conversations with people:

Impacts of Less Face to Face:

- Loss of Effective Communications
- Loss of Community Engagement and Public Consultation
- Shifts in Information Collection
- Challenges with Education

Loss of Effective Communications

Commonly available and understood statistics on effective person-to-person communications are:

- 55% of effective communications are derived from non-verbal communications such as body language, facial expressions etc.
- 38% of effective communications are derived from vocal aspects such as tone, intonation, speed of speech, volume of speech, emphasis and accents, etc.
- 7% of effective communications are derived from verbal aspects such as the words we use and includes the use of slang, vernacular, etc.

We have all experienced countless Teams, Zoom or Google Meet video calls by now. These platforms have enabled us to stay in contact with

colleagues but have also enabled something extra by allowing us to see ourselves. Whether we like it or not, being able to see our own expressions during these calls can actually help us become better communicators. Greater awareness of our expressions during meetings helps us improve our effective communications.

This shift in communication also impacts how municipal staff interact within municipal facilities. Gone, for a while anyway, are those impromptu hallway conversations. Gone, are staff dropping by a colleague's desk to chat about current activities. Some municipalities are encouraging their staff to routinely check in with co-workers and other colleagues via video conference calls. Not as a 'hey did you hear' but for the more important information regarding how their related activities are progressing. Encouraging your staff to make a video call (and activate their camera) versus a phone call will help them improve their communication effectiveness and give them a stronger sense of personal connection.



Loss of Community Engagement and Public Consultation

A very important facet of municipal work is the community engagement it achieves. Examples being engineering-operations teams working within neighbourhoods, solid waste teams collecting garbage and even bylaw officers. They are all seen as a part of the municipality, of the community and when you take them away or reduce their ability to interact with residents (masks hide smiles) you have lost some great municipal ambassadors.

Then, there is also the loss of public consultation, whether it be open houses, public hearings, or even Council meetings. Again, the use of video conference platforms and broadcasting tools have gone a long way. Municipalities must also find ways to continue open houses. The conversion of all open house boards, by placing them on websites or better yet embedding them in surveys goes a long way. Inviting respondents to post survey video calls to explore and discuss key aspects of projects yield much-needed qualitative input and address residents' concerns.

Shifts in Information Collection

Moving beyond adjustments to public consultation practices we have also seen an uptick in the conversion of printed forms into digital forms. Digital forms eliminate many physical risks associated with the COVID-19 Pandemic. Residents and staff no longer need to touch shared paper and pens or visit municipal facilities.

An added benefit of this switch is more accurate and consistent data. With digital forms there is no need to interpret handwriting, or correct formatting. Redundancy and human error are also limited because staff do not have to re-enter the paper information into a municipal system.



The re-emergence of QR Codes and the ease of use with built in smartphone camera readers also is making digital information capture easier for everyone. I have even experienced a QR Code-based contact-tracing form.

Challenges with Education

Yes, public and post-secondary education systems have been turned upside down due to the Pandemic. So have staff education programs within municipalities. Nearly all, traditional, in-person workshops and training courses have been cancelled or severely curtailed. Again, this has given added focus on the use of e-learning for municipal staff and as more municipalities consider this approach, they see the cost-effective benefits. This is very true for larger municipalities creating their own in-house e-learning courses or those sharing pre-developed courses with other municipalities. This approach has also been adapted by municipalities as a way of communicating to resident groups.

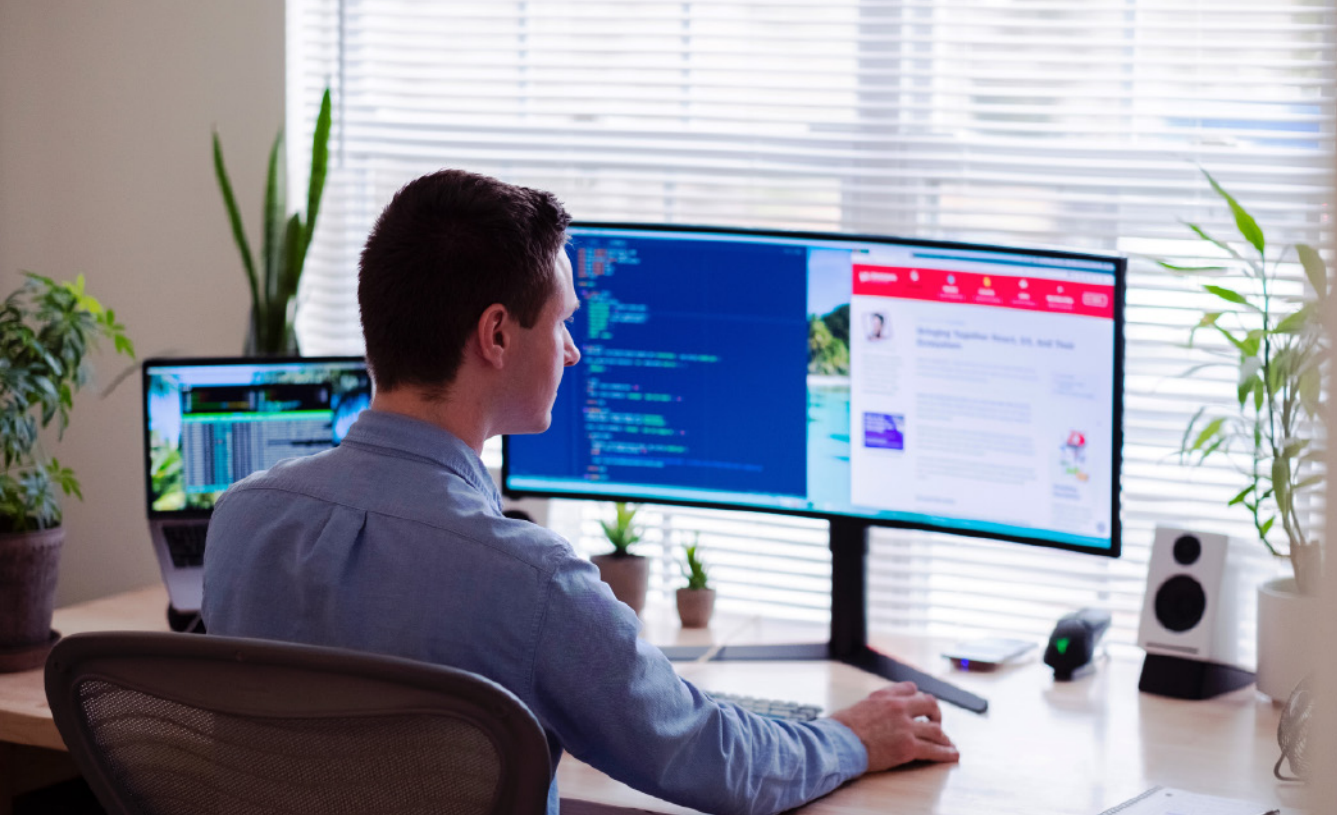
#3 REMOTE WORKING

The impacts of this societal shift are enormous and span so many facets of both community life and municipal government. In a recent survey, 77%* of the workforce say they want to continue working from home, at least weekly. **Imagine if 10% of your community's workforce shifted to working full-time from home. What are the immediate and long-term impacts on your community?**

Impacts of Remote Working:

- Staff Productivity
- Staff Scheduling & Position Coverage
- Resident-Based Shifts
 - Housing Needs - Size, Demand, Configurations
 - Traffic Congestion & Flow
- Services Shifts
 - Recreation & Community Services Needs
 - Local Professional & Personal Services
- Tax-based Shifts
 - Commercial Office Real Estate Sector
 - Retail Space Real Estate Sector
- Volunteering Opportunities

From an economic development perspective, if your municipality is an urban centre, commercial office space may suffer for some time. If you are a suburban or rural area you may see an increased percentage of your population working from home, effecting things such as:



- Morning and evening traffic flow
- Less on street parking challenges if some of the newly relocated home-based workers get rid of one of their household vehicles.
- The demand for personal professional services may increase at a local basis. Formerly commercial core workers may now seek doctors, dentists, lawyers and other professional services in their home community instead.
- Reduced commute time may increase demand on local restaurants for dine-in during weekdays.
- The volume of residents seeking outside activities as a means to interact with people and connect to their community may increase in areas such as volunteering, recreation facilities, organized sports, arts and cultural groups among others.
- Volunteering is a fascinating and positive benefit of this shift given the need of most municipalities to augment their staff contingent with some community volunteers (not to mention the value volunteerism brings to local community groups and associations.

From the perspective of a municipal government

Many may already be experiencing more structured interactions between staff accompanied by fewer opportunities to exchange information in the hallways or over the 'water cooler'. How has this affected staff efficiency and effectiveness? It is often said that there are both formal and informal organizational structures in a municipality. Not everything is achieved along the formal lines.

Let's look beyond where municipal employees are when they complete their work. The uncertainty over budgets coupled with staff's work demands begs the question 'which if any functions within the municipality can be outsourced?'. Various municipalities utilize outsourcing to manage specific functions in a more cost-effective manner.

One example is Maywood, California** which outsources all municipal services. Though this is at the far end of the spectrum, varying levels of outsourcing are being used to better manage budgets and services.

Managing professional support services on an ad hoc 'pay as you go' basis is one form of outsourcing which can accommodate maintenance or growth phases. In this case you can shrink expenses when the work is not necessary and expand during a growth phase prior to the positions being fully resourced internally.

*Global Workplace Analytics -- excerpt from <https://lnkd.in/diS7jGY>

(77% of the workforce say they want to continue to work from home, at least weekly. And 25 to 30% of the workforce will be working from home multiple days a week by the end of 2021.)

**https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maywood,_California

#4 DECLINE IN LOCAL MEDIA

Local news media being 'kneecapped' by COVID-19

By [The Canadian Press](#) | [News](#), [Politics](#) | April 30th 2020

As of April 29:

50 outlets have temporarily or permanently closed. Of these, 48 are community newspapers.

19 newspapers — 11 community and 8 daily papers — have cancelled some or all print editions.

78 outlets have reported layoffs or job losses.

2,053 editorial and non-editorial workers have been laid off.

The potential loss of local media outlets, especially community newspapers, has significant implications for municipalities. A key concern is how to reach residents with key messages, during a pandemic and afterwards. Most municipalities have adopted social media as a platform for delivering updates and time-sensitive information to residents. Is social media a comparable communication channel to local media?

In fact, research shows the only communication method that comes close to the reach and impact of community newspapers is e-newsletters. Since the introduction of CASL (Canadian Anti-Spam Legislation) open rates of e-newsletters have increased by 20%*. No, email marketing and communications is not dead.

The difference in reach metrics between social media and e-newsletters is often left out of the discussion. 1000 resident social media followers and 1000 resident e-newsletter subscribers are not equal, by a long shot.

Assuming both programs are adequately designed and run using industry best practices, here are the reach statistics:

1000 Facebook followers	1000 E-Newsletter subscribers
10% Reach** 100 residents see your message	50% Open rate*** 500 residents see your message

Additional points to consider:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Platform controls your list • Great for single message posts • Great for quick updates on fast moving stories • Reposting helps message exposure • Poor reference-ability: difficult to find a post once it moves up the timeline • Proactive delivery versus passive website 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Municipalities owns the subscriber list • Great for a mix of information & stories • Great for providing detailed information • Forward to a friend helps increase reach • Excellent reference-ability: can be accessed again and again along with links • Proactive delivery versus passive website
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Impacts of a Decline in Local Media:

- Effective Communications with Residents
- Marketing and Advertising of Municipal Programs/Services
- Community News & Connections
- Legal Notices

Effective Communications with Residents

Often smaller communities have one local media source, the local newspaper. The media tends to sensationalize certain news stories coming from City Hall. We hope that during the pandemic most newspapers have been responsible and respectful of important health and safety measures distributed by the local government. As noted above, along with social media, the use of a well-designed e-newsletter program ensures important information finds residents without distortion or misinterpretation.



Marketing and Advertising of Municipal Programs/Services

Pending local media, how will municipalities reach residents with programs, services information, and marketing ads? Social media may work for some topics, but programs and services deserve a more robust method. A CASL (and in many jurisdictions FIPPA) compliant e-mail subscriber list will enable the municipality to send compelling marketing messages to residents.

Community News & Connections

Community newspapers serve as a primary source for local news and events information. With their loss so goes an important community connection. Further erosion of the local business advertising base may permanently leave a void in local news and information. The ideal organization to pick up much of this content is the local municipality. Creating a weekly, bi-weekly or monthly e-newsletter can supplement the connectedness newspapers provide.

Legal Notices

Many jurisdictions require municipalities to publish legal notices in local newspapers. This means that losing a local newspaper compromises a community's ability to deliver important information. There have been some discussions between municipalities and provincial authorities to modify this requirement and allow municipalities to use a subscriber-based email notification program for publishing legal notices.

*15 Recommendations to Strengthen and Simplify CASL November 2017

<https://certimail.ca/en/articles/tag/casl/page/2/>

**Why Only 10% Of Your Facebook Followers See Your Posts

<https://www.causely.com/blog/why-only-ten-percent-of-your-facebook-followers-see-your-posts>

***The W Group, City of Surrey E-Newsletter Program Analytics Report

#5 REFOCUSED ON COMMUNITY

All levels of government in Canada have been actively involved in fighting the COVID-19 Pandemic. Each has gained or lost a degree of resident trust through their respective actions.

Impacts of Refocusing on Community:

- Resident Trust 'Credits'
- Proactively Measuring Resident Feedback
- Staff Connection with Community

Resident Trust 'Credits'

Municipal governments hold a lot of power and responsibility in contributing to the sense of safety its residents feel. The closure of civic facilities and curtailing of civic programs have made the communities safer for residents.

Much like a corporation building its brand trust, the trust held by residents for their respective municipalities comes from an accumulation of numerous interactions, experiences and information.

When your audience is faced with issues critical to their health, trust can be won or lost at a rapid pace. Consider Tylenol's product tampering in the early 1980s, or the Flint Michigan water crisis beginning in 2014. It may be too early to measure the long-lasting impact of all levels of government through the COVID-19 Pandemic. With that said, we may begin to see some of these outcomes in either Federal or Provincial elections.

Proactively Measuring Resident Feedback

The COVID-19 Pandemic unfolded with limited time to think about creating new feedback programs and no time to implement them. As municipalities reopen facilities it may be in their best interest to 'beef-up' their mechanisms for residents and customer feedback channels. Imagine customer feedback cards on steroids, where residents could quickly and easily provide feedback about services and programs. Feedback could additionally discuss how programs stand up to safety expectations/standards, and safety protocols Provincial Agencies have put in place.

This is not the time to allow protocols to go amiss and enable residents to have fodder they either take to social media or the Mayor's office. This is the time to monitor protocols closely and channel concerns through the customer feedback program.

This is where the steroids come into play. Traditionally, customer comment cards sit in a return box for an entire day (or longer) and only capture feedback from proactive customers. An effective customer feedback program is proactive and invites customers to provide feedback on every transaction and visit. This way, when there is any issue, it routes them immediately and directly to the managers who can address the customer's concerns. This prevents the customer from using other channels to communicate their displeasure while alerting staff and facilities to correct and protocol errors. Continuous performance improvement can be easy to establish for your municipality. It is worth getting out in front of issues before they become issues.

Staff Connection with Community

One final advantage with a customer feedback program, along with protecting municipal trust (and actually boosting it) is that the volume of positive comments and outright compliments is always so much higher. Sharing positive feedback with your staff goes a long way towards boosting morale and empowering a stronger sense of community connection.



