

# Predictions for Broadband After COVID-19

The pandemic will have a lasting impact on the way people live and work through technology.

By Trevor Jones / OTELCO

**W**hen writing for magazines, it's crucial to write content that is either evergreen or will at least not lose relevance in the time between article writing and publication. For *BROADBAND COMMUNITIES*, that's four to six weeks.

Why that preamble? As I write this article, I am winding up my third week of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. New York cases are still increasing, and in rural Maine we're wondering how severe the outbreak will become here. It's difficult not to write about the pandemic in this context, but I also have no idea where "the curve" will be when you read this.

With that in mind, I'll get out my crystal ball and predict some lasting changes that will result from the pandemic. You, with the benefit of two months' elapsed time, will be able to see how my predictions fared.

**There will be a significant, lasting increase in telecommuting.** Millions of people are working from home who didn't before, some in jobs that employers said couldn't be done from home. It's now looking like many people will work from home for at least six weeks, by which time, we'll have proven those jobs can be done, and done well from home. In the short run, people may be eager to get back to the office, but in the long run, I think we'll see a sustained increase in telecommuting. That's a good thing for the environment and for broadband.

**Progress will be made getting doctors compensated properly for telemedicine.** As broadband advocates, we often hold up telemedicine as a health and safety reason for public investment in better connectivity. Public policy surrounding the compensation of doctors for telemedicine appointments has been a major roadblock to adoption. In this crisis, it is vital to keep the healthy separate from the sick, and telemedicine does that. States such as Massachusetts and Florida have expanded telehealth coverage, and I believe more states will follow suit before the outbreak passes. This is good news for the long-term health of rural communities.

**Video communication will play a bigger role, permanently.** The other day, my wife and I talked with our son on the West Coast using FaceTime. We could have done

it before, but it never occurred to me until I started doing more video conferencing at work. I think this will be true for many as they adapt to video communication. I've also participated in social events on video chat tools including Microsoft Teams and Google Hangouts and watched as co-workers who don't travel "meet" each other for the first time on a video call. Now that people have been exposed to the added connection they get from seeing co-workers, friends and loved ones, many won't go back to plain old phone calls.

**More businesses will adopt cloud computing for core applications.** The other day an OTELCO salesperson told me that a prospect considering OTELCO's cloud-hosted phone system commented, "If we had this cloud system, moving operations to our homes would be easier." Suddenly, disaster recovery and mobility are not novel concepts to businesses. As a result, I think more organizations will adopt cloud-based apps and need faster internet to do it.

**Public support for broadband expansion will grow swiftly in the months following the pandemic.** For most of my career, I've found it frustrating when consumers complained about internet speeds but wouldn't pay to upgrade to a higher speed. Suddenly that has changed, and OTELCO is getting hundreds of calls from customers to upgrade service. The fact that people are willing to pay for faster service means that they'll be more likely to support efforts to use public funds to bring faster service to their communities and their states.

Everyone can now see quite clearly what broadband advocates have said for years: Businesses now understand that having a fast connection at the office if employees can't get one at home is not enough, and parents and educators now understand distance learning and the vital role high-speed internet plays.

Without a doubt, COVID-19 will have a lasting impact on how people live and work, and it will have a positive influence on the fight for better broadband. ❖

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