Creating a Digital Work Projects Administration

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Summary

To address the massive unemployment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the next administration should establish a Digital Work Projects Administration (D-WPA),[1] creating government-funded jobs that people can perform from their own homes or other safe locations. Inspired by the Depression-era Work Projects Administration, or WPA, the modern D-WPA would put millions of unemployed Americans to work serving the public good and speeding the country's economic recovery.

In the D-WPA, work will be digital instead of physical. Digital tools allow many jobs to be done from anywhere good internet access is available. D-WPA participants could work safely and effectively no matter how long the pandemic limits in-person employment. Working remotely, D-WPA participants could help combat the COVID-19 pandemic and mitigate its economic and societal impacts. At the same time, participants would learn, practice, and improve digital skills of increasing value in the modern workforce.

The D-WPA should be established within the Department of Labor, with sufficient funding to put up to 4 million Americans back to work quickly and safely. Funds for this program should be requested in the next COVID-19 recovery package. In the meantime, existing DOL employment and training programs could be used to support an initial cohort of workers for the D-WPA, demonstrating proof of concept while efforts are underway to secure full funding. The D-WPA should create both public- and private-sector positions supporting the national response to the pandemic's health and economic impacts.

Challenge and Opportunity

A Digital Works Project Administration (D-WPA) would provide an elegant solution to several pressing and interrelated challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, as explained below.

COVID's Impact on Employment
Since the first COVID-19 case was diagnosed in the United States in January 2020, over 15 million Americans have been infected and over 360,000 have died from the disease. Over 10 million people are out of work[2] and hundreds of thousands of businesses have closed due to the pandemic's economic and societal impacts.[3] While unemployment has decreased slowly since

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[1] Malone, T.W. (2020). Why we need a 'Digital WPA' similar to the Depression-era Works Progress Administration. The Hill, May 4. https://thehill.com/opinion/technology/495943-why-we-need-a-digital-wpa-similar-to-the-depression-era-works-progress.

[2] U.S. Department of Labor (2020). The Employment Situation—November 2020. Bureau of Labor Statistics, December 4. https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empsit.pdf.

[3] Sundaram, A. (2020). Yelp Data Shows 60% of Business Closures Due to the Coronavirus Pandemic Are Now Permanent. CNBC, December 11. https://www.cnbc.com/2020/09/16/yelp-data-shows-60percent-of-business-closures-due-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic-are-now-permanent.html.

peaking in April, long-term unemployment is on the rise. The U.S. unemployment rate is projected to remain above 6% through 2024.[4]

Pandemic-related unemployment is an urgent issue that demands federal action. Many have called for pandemic-relief efforts to include a work-relief program that would address high and persistent unemployment by creating and funding jobs, just as the original Work Projects Administration did in the Great Depression.[5]

Overcoming Work Obstacles with Remote Jobs
The public-health measures needed to try to contain COVID-19 create many obstacles to implementing a traditional WPA-like program. Most workplaces continue to operate at reduced capacity and cannot easily add more workers on site. Public-transportation options for getting to and from work remain limited while the pandemic is ongoing. Many capable workers, particularly women and low-wage workers, must remain home (even if their physical workplace is open and accessible) due to increased childcare or eldercare responsibilities, including supervision of school-age children while many schools operate online. A Digital Work Projects Administration would overcome these obstacles by expanding access to remote work—both by creating new remote jobs and by providing digital access and training to enable more workers to take advantage of remote-work opportunities.

Jobs that Benefit Society While Helping Workers Advance
The priority of a D-WPA would be to put unemployed people to work—from a safe location of their choice—in jobs that benefit the public. There are many such opportunities. Contact tracers could inform people they may have been exposed to COVID-19. Health-care assistants could help schedule high-priority people for vaccinations, and ensure that they return for follow-up doses. Online tutors and mentors could help teachers and parents ensure that all children are able to engage successfully in remote learning. Remote guides could help people access public services. Designers and coders could improve online interfaces to government websites. Performing artists, writers, and other creative professionals could inform, entertain, and engage their communities, and could create lasting multimedia records of COVID-19 and its impacts.

By providing alternative employment paths for people whose careers have been disrupted, a D-WPA would build on the growing worldwide trend towards digital work. The United States lags peer nations in developing and maintaining a digitally capable workforce.[6] While many U.S. workers use digital tools productively, too many others lack the necessary skills to do so. A D-WPA would create new entry points into the digital economy. A D-WPA would prepare

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[4] Congressional Budget Office (2020). An Update to the Budget Outlook: 2020 to 2030. https://www.cbo.gov/publication/56517.
[5] 5 Karabel, J. (2020). What would FDR do? We need a new WPA to fight massive unemployment in the coronavirus era. https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/05/14/coronavirus-massive-job-loss-we-need-modern-day-wpa-column/5182074002/; USA TODAY, May 14; Krebs, P. (2020). Why we need a new WPA. CNN, April 13. https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/10/opinions/works-progress-administration-for-covid-19-crisis-humanities-krebs/index.html; Warner, J. (2020). Biblioracle: We need a new WPA for the COVID-19 era. Chicago Tribune, July 28. https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/books/ct-books-biblioracle-0802-20200728-gt5znnfjlzamlaqffmaivvio4y-story.html.
[6] OECD (2019). OECD Skills Outlook 2019. http://www.oecd.org/education/oecd-skills-outlook-e11c1c2d-en.htm.

participants for long-term career advancement by providing digital-skills training and on-the-job experience. And by upskilling the workforce, a D-WPA would improve the international competitiveness of U.S. industries as our nation's economy rebuilds.

Addressing the Problem at Scale
Given the unpredictable course of the pandemic itself and the recovery from it, we as a nation must be prepared to address a shortage of 10 million or more jobs[7] for at least an additional year. Based on Department of Labor estimates of the suitability of jobs for telework,[8] a D-WPA could reasonably aim to provide up to 4 million remote job opportunities—thereby addressing 40% of the national pandemic-related job shortage—at a cost of approximately $200 billion per year. For perspective, in 1936, 40% of all Americans then unemployed participated in the original WPA. [9]

Plan of Action

Federal Structure
To quickly begin to create badly needed jobs, a Digital Work Projects Administration should be immediately established in the Department of Labor (DOL) and given access to the public workforce system[10] overseen by DOL's Employment and Training Administration (ETA). This system, which evolved out of the original WPA and similar programs, operates at the state and local levels across the nation to help displaced workers recover from local economic distress or national disasters.

But in its current manifestation, as authorized in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA), the public workforce system focuses almost entirely on worker training and employment services. The magnitude of the current crisis demands expanded use of its authority to create federally subsidized jobs. By collaborating with partners with deep experience in the digital economy, the system could provide the D-WPA with the resources it needs to create jobs and distribute funds across the many geographic communities and professional communities of practice distressed by COVID-19.

Operating at full scale, the D-WPA would place several million workers in the public sector or heavily distressed portions of the private sector. The D-WPA would also subsidize employment services and training programs for hires and provide supplemental assistance for those lacking

[7] Hess, A. (2020). The U.S. still has 10 million fewer jobs now than before the pandemic. CNBC, December 8. https://www.cnbc.com/2020/12/08/the-us-has-10-million-fewer-jobs-now-than-before-the-pandemic.html.
[8] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020). Ability to work from home: evidence from two surveys and implications for the labor market in the COVID-19 pandemic. Monthly Labor Review. https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2020/article/ability-to-work-from-home.htm.
[9] Congressional Research Service (2010). Job Creation Programs of the Great Depression: The WPA and the CCC. https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R41017.html.
[10] Urban Institute (2020). The Public Workforce System. Local Workforce System Guide. https://workforce.urban.org/topics/public-workforce-system.

access to the internet. The Secretary of Labor should request funding from Congress as part of the next COVID-19 relief package to achieve these goals. To ensure equitable implementation, the Secretary of Labor should oversee development of a national strategy to (1) guide allocation and distribution of funds and (2) align job opportunities with national priorities. The strategic-planning team should include key economic and workforce advisors from other federal agencies and the Executive Office of the President. Additionally, they should gather input from representative stakeholders from the business, labor, and workforce-training communities. The national strategy should give special consideration to the groups being hit hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic, such as low-income workers. These groups should receive priority access to D-WPA jobs and to upskilling opportunities that could help reduce inequities in the workforce.

While efforts are underway to secure sustained, large-scale funding and to complete development of the national strategy, current ETA programs and funds could be used to support an initial cohort of D-WPA workers. This initial effort could be focused on a few key sectors, therefore providing immediate relief to those who need it most, demonstrating proof of concept to Congress, and providing valuable input to the strategic planners.

Role of State and Local Entities
The public workforce system includes state workforce boards and local workforce development boards (WDBs) that share in the planning and management of job-creation, job-placement, and worker education and worker training programs.[11] All these boards include government representatives, business leaders, educators, social service organizations, labor union representatives, and workforce professionals. The existing network of 50 state boards and nearly 600 local WDBs nationwide could serve as the D-WPA's interface with potential workers and employers. The workforce-board network could also support distribution of funds as well as collection and reporting of information on program utilization.

Each state workforce board would coordinate and provide oversight for D-WPA activities within its jurisdiction, and would oversee the allocation and distribution of resources provided to the state by the D-WPA. They would work together with local boards to identify digital-work opportunities appropriate to local economies and to capitalize on them by integrating D-WPA resources into workforce-development strategies. Strengthening connections to digitally engaged HR services and training providers will be essential, for example by augmenting ties to online remote work platforms[12] and to providers of free or inexpensive educational resources for digital upskilling.[13] To assist community members with D-WPA job placement, the boards would

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[11] The current system of Workforce Development Boards was established by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014. State-level workforce boards are appointed by the governors of individual states, and include representatives of businesses, public agencies, workers, and educators. The state workforce boards oversee local boards and job centers and guide statewide workforce strategy. The local WDBs, comprised of members appointed by local elected officials, oversee workforce investments to best serve the interests of the workers and businesses in their community.
[12] For example, UpWork, 99Designs, and Freelancer.com.
[13] For example, Grow with Google, https://grow.google/; Smith,B. (2020) Microsoft's global digital skills initiative, June 30. https://blogs.microsoft.com/blog/2020/06/30/microsoft-launches-initiative-to-help-25-million-people-worldwide-acquire-the-

leverage close existing connections to the DOL-funded online CareerOneStop and on-the-ground American Job Centers.

Funding Streams

A variety of mechanisms for hiring and funding remote workers will be needed to maximize the D-WPA's impact and effectiveness. We propose three ways in which funding could flow from the D-WPA to employers and then to workers. Two of these involve direct funding through states, while the third is focused on nationwide programs. Additional funding mechanisms could be added as necessary and appropriate.

Stream 1: D-WPA funds would flow from DOL to states to support statewide programs. Each state would be required to establish a program to provide supplemental grants for the equipment, broadband access, and basic digital-skills training that some new online workers need to bridge the digital divide. Each state would also have the opportunity to create a program providing D-WPA civil servants to supplement the workforces of state and municipal agencies.

Stream 2: Funds would pass through state workforce boards to WDBs at the city or county levels. The WDBs would make awards to trainers and employers, who would provide services and jobs.

Stream 3: Funds would flow from DOL directly to organizations running nationwide job programs in specialized occupations or providing nationwide training programs available to D-WPA workers in a large number of locations.

Examples of Jobs

A few examples illustrate the types of jobs that the D-WPA could support through the public workforce system, the types of impacts they could have, and the appropriate funding streams for each.

- **Government services.** D-WPA workers assigned to state or municipal agencies could help Americans navigate access to government services. Workers could be employed locally or through state-level contractors. Teams of D-WPA workers could also design new interfaces to agency websites and improve the presentation of content. *(Stream 1. Similar federal opportunities could be funded through Stream 3.)*
- **Education.** With so many schools—from pre-K to the university level—operating remotely, the demand for D-WPA workers who can help students and families manage successful online learning is high. Local workers could assist with curricular learning and present extracurricular learning programs. *(Stream 2 for school systems or social-service providers. National opportunities in education, such as online curriculum development and tutoring or mentoring in advanced subjects, could be funded through Stream 3.)*
- **Arts.** Creative artists can help us all understand and cope with the disruption the pandemic has caused, and document its impact on our communities. Local arts

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digital-skills-needed-in-a-covid-19-economy/; and open courses offered by edX, https://www.edx.org/ and Coursera, https://www.coursera.org/.

organizations could hire arts professionals through D-WPA to create, perform, or distribute works, restore some of the connections that COVID-19 has frayed, and create a lasting record of these extraordinary times. *(Stream 2)*

- **Public health measures.** Many more contact tracers are needed to help stop the spread of COVID-19, and most contact-tracing work can be done remotely. Specialized skills are required for effective contact training, as is knowledge of national and state public health regulations and standards. But familiarity with the local community is also key. The D-WPA partners network could help match workers' backgrounds to tracing needs. *(Stream 1 and 2 to hire tracers through state or county agencies. Stream 2 or 3 for public-health training.)*

- **Distressed industries.** The airline industry, for instance, is distressed due to the pandemic's impact on air travel, and its workforce is hence in low demand. But many of the industry's workers have very useful digital, interpersonal, and other skills. These workers could temporarily be remotely deployed to support pandemic response. Airline customer-service agents could assist with scheduling vaccine administration and telemedicine. Supply-chain experts could help manage production and distribution of scarce personal protective equipment, vaccines, and medications. As the pandemic recedes and air travel starts to return to previous levels, some of these workers would return to airline work. Others would combine their digital work skills with knowledge gained in their temporary assignment to advance their careers in a new industry. *(Stream 3 funding to national firms in distressed industries.)*

Conclusion

A carefully designed and properly executed Digital Work Projects Administration (D-WPA), guided by a national strategy that ensures effective support for remote work across the many communities in need, should be a major component of the next administration's pandemic relief and recovery plan. With the goal of creating millions of jobs we need now and the added benefit of raising the digital capabilities of the American workforce, the D-WPA would help pull America through the current crisis and build a stronger, more competitive economy in the post-COVID-19 era.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. **How will D-WPA help workers and industries transition into a new, stronger economy?**

D-WPA employees will broaden their repertoire of digital work skills and learn new ways to use digital skills they already possess. Employers will expand their use of digital technologies and introduce more flexible and adaptable workflows into their businesses. Companies will become more competitive and more resilient, while upskilled workers will be more valuable to their employers and will open up additional pathways for career advancement. These advantages will persist as the economy recovers.

2. **How will D-WPA support people who would like to work remotely but lack basic digital skills or Internet services?**

A D-WPA should be designed to help bridge the digital divide, not expand it. No American should be disqualified from a job because of broadband insecurity, so a D-WPA must be able to provide broadband access and technology tools (e.g., tablets and computers) to workers who cannot afford these basic necessities of digital work. It must provide entry points to the digital workplace for digital novices as well as upskilling opportunities for those who are already digitally capable. Not all jobs can be done remotely, but many more people could perform meaningful work from home or another safe location with access to basic equipment and a little training. D-WPA partners like community colleges and online learning providers can provide basic digital-skills training to workers whose other interests and abilities make them a good fit for available jobs.

3. **Why should private companies be eligible to hire D-WPA workers?**

For-profit companies working in sectors of the economy that have been particularly hard hit by the economic downturn accompanying the pandemic should be eligible for some D-WPA programs to minimize layoffs and business closures, and to expand the benefits of remote work to industries that have been slower to adapt digital technologies. Private nonprofit organizations often contract with local government to provide social services. They should be eligible for D-WPA awards to expand or continue their work via remote jobs.

4. **How can the D-WPA best provide support for workers in specialized fields?**

Specialized training can be efficiently delivered through nationwide providers. National-level trade and professional associations already play important roles in workforce development and credentialing in many areas, such as digital health and supply chain management. As D-WPA partners, such associations can train workers, assess and certify their skills, and place them in jobs throughout the country.

5. What kind of jobs would the D-WPA support?

The D-WPA could support any job that can be done remotely, utilizes digital skills, and contributes to the public good. Some examples are listed below, organized by category.

Arts, Humanities, and Communications
This category is inspired by the famous "Federal Project One" of the original WPA, which created many of the WPA's most lasting artifacts.[14] The category could include:
- Projects employing visual and performing artists, humanists, writers, composers, and associated creative technical staff to document and reflect upon the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Americans. Their findings and interpretations would be made freely available online.
- Digital curation and preservation projects.
- Public-relations projects such as managing and archiving social-media communication.

Education and Caregiving
- Online tutoring and mentoring projects for pre-K and K-12 students.
- Online nutrition and physical-education programs and counseling.
- Online job training for essential digital skills.
- Curriculum development for online D-WPA learning programs.
- Online enrichment programs supporting childcare and eldercare in the home.
- Training and support programs for in-home caregivers.

Digital Health
- Contact tracing.
- Scheduling initial vaccine administration as well as follow-up dosing.
- Public-health messaging (e.g., regarding the importance of vaccination or obeying social-distancing recommendations).
- Assistance with identifying health-care providers and scheduling services.
- Telehealth projects to support expanded remote delivery of healthcare services, including mental-health services, while access to traditional in-person care remains limited.
- Projects to design and implement upgraded telehealth services to improve access to and quality of healthcare beyond the duration of the pandemic.

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14 Federal One included art, music, theatre, and writers' projects as well as a survey of historically significant state and local archives. Its workers created over 2500 murals in public buildings across the country, gave millions of Americans their first exposure to live theatre, were the founding players in 34 new symphony orchestras, and wrote guidebooks for every state. Many of its participants went on to distinguished careers. Among the most celebrated are Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, and Saul Bellow; Orson Welles, Elia Kazan, and John Houseman; Dorothea Lange, Jackson Pollock, Louise Nevelson, and Jacob Lawrence.

Public Infrastructure

- Projects to enhance the security of airports, transportation centers, and other public facilities using video monitoring and x-ray scanners.
- Projects to monitor, manage, and protect smart-grid systems to optimize energy use and mitigate cybersecurity threats.
- Projects to monitor crowd density at public transportation systems and venues in support of safe distancing measures.
- Projects to monitor structural integrity of roads, bridges, and other infrastructure using satellite imagery.
- Motor-vehicle safety projects, including enforcement and notification of vehicle and tire recalls.

Social Services

- Translation and interpretation projects, including disability-related telecommunications services such as video-relay services.
- Projects related to digital public libraries, such as improving access for persons with disabilities, expanding offerings, and improving security.
- Enforcement of child support, case management for missing and exploited children, and support for runaway and homeless youth as well as youth transitioning from foster care.
- Assistance for the homeless, victims of domestic violence, substance abusers.
- Support for criminal offenders re-entering society.

Remote Civil Service for Federal, State, or Municipal Agencies

- Navigators and technical-support specialists to help people access government services, including veterans' services.
- Projects to design and implement improved online interfaces to facilitate access to government services and personnel via smartphones or computers.
- Projects to improve online access to reliable, up-to-date government information, as well as to enhance agency communications via digital and social media.
- Transcription editing and annotation to make records from public hearings, meetings, and other proceedings more accessible.
- Projects to enhance collection and reporting of data on seizures of drugs, weapons, or contraband.
- Data analysis, data visualization, and online research to support agency missions.

Retraining or Redeployment

- Projects to transition workers from industries shut down by the pandemic to jobs utilizing their skills and interests in a new industry, or to help their industries adapt to online work.
- Projects to redeploy management, supply-chain, and supervisory professionals to industries critical for responding to the pandemic and supporting economic recovery.
- Projects to help veterans repurpose their military training for remote civilian work.

About the Authors

Philip Lippel is the Assistant Director of the MIT Washington Office, representing the Institute's research enterprise and educational mission to federal agencies and Congress. He is interested in the multifaceted role universities play in the innovation ecosystem: educating tomorrow's workforce, driving discoveries, and helping transition emerging technologies to commerce. Philip received an A.B. in Physics and in Theatre from Williams College, and M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in Physics from Brandeis University. He was a AAAS Science and Technology Policy Fellow, and has worked on a variety of research, education, communication and policy issues nationally and internationally.
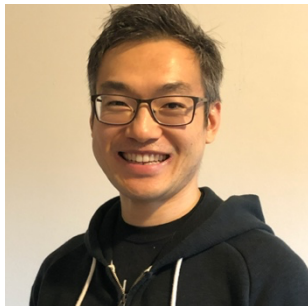
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About the Day One Project

The Day One Project is dedicated to democratizing the policymaking process by working with new and expert voices across the science and technology community, helping to develop actionable policies that can improve the lives of all Americans, and readying them for Day One of the next presidential term. For more about the Day One Project, visit **dayoneproject.org**.