

State remains desirable place for remote workers

By JAMIE GOLDBERG
The Oregonian

In the years before the pandemic, Duncan Gans would fantasize with his then scattered college friends about moving together to the same city.

The idea seemed fanciful. His friends worked in offices across the United States. And while Gans sometimes worked remotely and traveled for his job at a public opinion research firm, he still felt pressured to live in Washington, D.C., where his company is based.

But when office workers were sent home en masse in the early days of the pandemic, Gans began to wonder whether he needed to remain in the small row house he shared with eight others to save money in an expensive rental market. In August 2020, he and four of his friends from Bowdoin College, a small liberal arts school in Maine, packed up and moved across the country to live together in a house in Bend.

"I work in a space where there was an assumption that you live in this 30-mile radius around D.C.," said Gans, 24. "That was honestly a big deterrent for me doing that work, despite it being something I really care about. Being able to live in a place that has a lot of outdoor access but still do work that I really enjoy means a lot."

Millions of workers across the United States switched to remote work early in the pandemic. Nearly two years later, many still haven't returned to offices, and it's become clear some never will.

The newfound freedom to work from anywhere has allowed some to rethink where they want to live, a trend that could have profound impacts on the economy and lead to a long-term shift in national migration patterns.

Before the pandemic, only about 6% of the American workforce worked from home, according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates. A separate Bureau of Labor Statistics survey found that the number of people working remotely jumped to 35% in May 2020 before steadily declining over the next year. An elevated 11% of the U.S. workforce was continuing to work from home as of November, according to the survey.

Some large companies have embraced the shift as a permanent one, saying their employees will forever have the option to work remotely and are using those policies to lure new hires. Some cities and states are looking to take advantage of the shift, too. Tulsa, Oklahoma, for example, will pay remote workers up to \$10,000 to move to the city.

Josh Lehner, an analyst with Oregon's Office of Economic Analysis, said it's too early to know how prevalent remote work will be in the long-term and how a spike in telecommuting could change migration patterns. He said it's important to note that only about a third of jobs in the United States can be done remotely.

However, the longer the pandemic drags on, he said, the more likely the new work patterns will stick. Oregon had more people working from home and better internet access than most states before the pandemic, Lehner noted, which could make it a desirable destination for remote workers in the future.

And while the long-term effects are still unclear, even a small change in the percentage of people working remotely could have far-reaching effects.

"This is the equivalent of the internet in 1997," Lehner said. "We're years away from knowing how this is going to work out."



Duncan Gans works from a coworking space called The Haven in Bend.

It is clear, however, that a move to remote work during the pandemic has given many workers more options. Some, like Gans, are choosing to come to Oregon. Others are choosing to leave.

Nathan Bergfelt had worked for a small creative marketing agency in Portland for several years before the pandemic. The company had an active office culture that managers believed spurred creativity and collaboration. Bergfelt said he couldn't have envisioned working remotely.

But that changed when offices closed in March 2020. Bergfelt and his colleagues soon learned that they could do their jobs effectively while working apart. Even Bergfelt's boss is now in the process of buying a home in Idaho with plans to work remotely at times from the new house.

Bergfelt's partner, Sarah Roundtree, was admitted to Penn State University for a Ph.D. program in counseling last year. Since July, Bergfelt has been working remotely permanently from State College, Pennsylvania.

Roundtree's aspirations in academia may dictate where the couple will live. But Bergfelt doesn't have to give up his Portland-based job.

"The most important thing to me is to be with my partner and my dog, but both me and my partner also want to feel satisfied in our careers," said Bergfelt, 27. "Now that I've realized through this that I can be really satisfied with not necessarily being in the office, I can be much more flexible on where her job takes her."

Remote work has enabled others to find a better job without having to uproot their lives.

Portland resident Sarah Cullerton said she

struggled to find a sustainable work-life balance in her previous job working in support operations for software companies.

She didn't look for new work because there weren't many options in her field locally. But last summer, many more companies were advertising fully remote jobs. After interviewing with several, she started a new job in July for a tech firm based in San Francisco.

"All my family and friends and infrastructure are here," said Cullerton, 34. "It's worth it for me to stay. I don't think I could ever move for a job."

A report from LinkedIn last fall found that more than 30% of workers who applied to paid U.S. job postings on LinkedIn in August 2021 were applying for remote work, an indication that more workers are seeking out flexibility in their work setups — and that more employers are offering it.

Berrin Erdogan, a Portland State University professor who studies employee behavior, said a tight labor market is forcing businesses to rethink the benefits they provide employees. Many now expect better compensation, more autonomy and, often, the flexibility to work remotely.

Erdogan suspects part- or full-time remote work, which companies may now see as novel, will be more widely adopted. And employees, in turn, may feel more content at companies that put a greater emphasis on supporting workers.

"Many companies will need to adapt to the new reality and may need to rethink how they are recruiting and retaining employees," Erdogan said.

Damon Runberg, the Oregon Employment Department's regional economist for

much of central Oregon, said remote work could benefit smaller metropolitan areas that have sufficient housing for remote workers and don't have as many large companies with big office footprints. However, he said, if there is a scarcity of housing and not enough new construction, an influx of remote workers could drive up housing prices, already a challenge for Bend and other state metros.

The LinkedIn report found that applicants in Bend were more likely to apply for remote work than applicants from any other city in the country. Eugene ranked fifth on the list.

"Yes, people are searching out Bend for remote work," Runberg said. "But also, local people are looking for these remote jobs because there are a lot of benefits there — the biggest being that remote jobs tend to pay significantly higher than the average wage from local employers."

Gans is among many remote workers who have sought out Bend.

A year and a half after leaving Washington, D.C., he now owns a house in Bend and has no plans to leave. Two of the four friends he moved with to central Oregon remain in the city as well. Gans now travels often to visit friends and family across the country while working remotely.

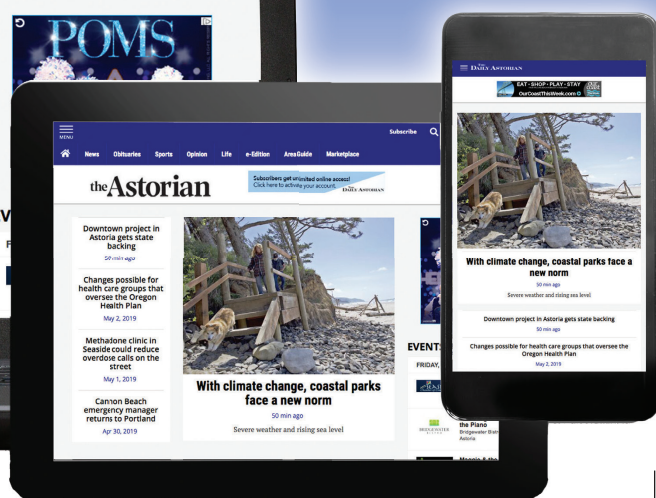
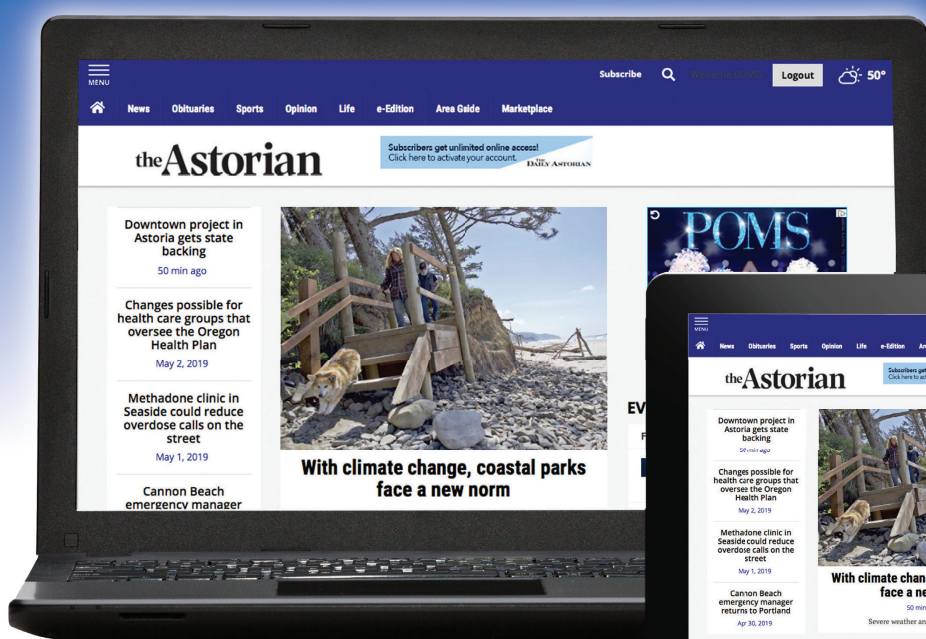
When he's in Bend, he works from a coworking space called The Haven that overlooks the Deschutes River. There, he has met numerous other remote workers, many of whom came to Bend during the pandemic as well.

"I think I would be hesitant to ever go back to a job that needed me in person," Gans said. "Working remotely has just made me realize that the location is more arbitrary than I thought."

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