



RURAL  
ONLINE  
INITIATIVE™

# RURAL ONLINE INITIATIVE

Annual Program Report 2019-2020





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Dear valued stakeholder,

I am pleased to report on the remarkable impacts achieved by USU Extension's Rural Online Initiative (ROI) program in 2020, despite the exceptional challenges we have all experienced. As I reflect on the year, it is remarkable how much our small team accomplished in both strengthening and diversifying Utah's rural economy.

In April 2018, Governor Gary Herbert signed House Bill 327, which was sponsored by Representative Mike Noel and Senator David Hinkins. At this time, the concept of a remote work education program for Utahns in rural counties was quite novel, even revolutionary in the field of economic development. Our leaders recognized the opportunity presented by remote work given how business functions in our rapidly changing technological economy. In addition, Utah was in a unique position with adequate broadband infrastructure across the state. Yet, no one would have anticipated the significant increase in remote work implementation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Again, Utah was prepared.

In 2020, the impacts and achievements of the ROI program were captured through continuous program evaluation efforts and documentation of success stories from our alumni. In this report, you will learn about the impact of our remote work certification courses. These courses led to the creation of 167 new remote job placements in rural counties, which are equivalent to the economic impact of over 6,154 jobs in urban counties. Nevertheless, behind every metric is a unique story of how remote work has improved the quality of life for individuals and families. Going forward, the ROI program remains undeterred in its dedication to providing specialized remote work training and career mentoring to people in rural communities across Utah. In our research, we found that after completing our course, 96% of participants had a higher level of confidence in successfully finding remote work opportunities. In addition, we also found that people across rural Utah are overwhelmingly open to the opportunity of remote work. They are eager to learn new skills that will allow them to prosper in a changing economy, while choosing to raise their families in a rural community.

Entering 2021, we have the infrastructure and systems in place to accommodate a higher influx of participants in both our professional and leadership courses. Our new Master Remote Work Leader certificate course was designed to teach leaders how to create remote work plans for their organizations and manage remote employees according to best practices. Our objectives through this new course are to assist Utah businesses in growing the supply of remote jobs in the state and successfully obtain GOED's Rural Economic Development Incentive (REDI) by hiring remote workers from rural counties.

I invite you to review the ROI program's annual report and hope you will gain a renewed appreciation for the tremendous character and capabilities of people in our rural communities. As our economy changes, we cannot forget the heritage of Utah's great rural communities. The ROI team is proud to lead this rewarding work and is committed to improving the lives of rural residents by empowering them through remote work. Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'PH', enclosed within a large, loopy oval shape.

**Paul Hill**

*Extension Professor & Program Director  
Utah State University Extension  
Rural Online Initiative*



## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

**D**uring the 2018 legislative session, House Bill 327: Rural Online Initiative was passed and signed into law by former Governor Gary R. Herbert. Funding was appropriated to Utah State University Extension for program development and delivery across 15 targeted rural counties which formally began program delivery to rural residents on October 1, 2018. Since then, the Rural Online Initiative (ROI) program has expanded to serve 21 rural Utah counties.

The ROI is an innovative and timely program that empowers rural communities by providing education, training, and services for remote work opportunities as an employee, online freelancer, or online business owner. The program began with the Master Remote Work Professional (MRWP) certificate course from USU Extension and has expanded to include the Master Remote Work Leader (MRWL) certificate course. Residents can learn more about each course or sign up at [remoteworkcertificate.com](http://remoteworkcertificate.com).

The MRWP is a one-month certification course that teaches participants the skills required to function successfully in a remote work environment. Participants learn everything from effective communication techniques for team collaboration to specific software tools commonly used in telework settings. The course also assists participants in their preparation to search and interview for legitimate remote jobs, bid on online freelance jobs, or start an ecommerce business. Scholarships for additional skills training are available at the end of the course to enhance participants' professional skill sets.

The MRWL is a one-month certification course piloted in February 2020. This course was designed for businesses located along the Wasatch Front. It provides training to organizational leaders on the best practices and core skills for effectively creating remote work environments in their organizations and leading hybrid-remote and fully distributed employees. Throughout the course, participants create remote work plans that could be transitioned into remote work policies within their organizations.

Since 2018, ROI has expanded to pilot other courses:

- **Ecommerce for Rural Businesses** that helps new and existing entrepreneurs create, market, and manage their online websites.
- **Remote Job Search: Skills for Success** that educates MRWP graduates and other jobseekers on the tools needed to successfully navigate the remote job search process.
- **4-H Remote Skills Camp: For College and Career Readiness** that educates high school students on remote work as a career readiness option.

# PROGRAM GOALS AND RESULTS

For the MRWP course, total enrollment (in-state and out-of-state participants) in its first year (October 2018 - September 2019) was 576 compared to a total of 862 in its second year (October 2019 - November 2020) with the onset of COVID-19. The target counties in the identified ROI service region were divided into three geographic regions, with an identified program coordinator for each region. A key employment goal for the program was to generate at least one remote job per month in each of the three Utah regions, with a cumulative goal of 180 jobs generated over the program’s first and second years. The program was near meeting its employment expectations. See Table 1.

For the MRWL course, the intended audience included organizational leaders with businesses located along the Wasatch Front region, or companies approved for the Governor’s Office of Economic Development’s Rural Economic Development Incentive (REDI) program. This was the target group for the course because this area has the highest job growth and lowest unemployment numbers. Given these circumstances, the market for talent is fierce, and helping businesses connect to remote work talent in these areas would help increase job opportunities for rural Utah residents. Target goals for the MRWL course were to recruit at least 15 businesses per cohort and ensure 80% of participants created remote work plans. Both goals were achieved with a total of 104 participants in all five cohorts and more than 80% successfully creating remote work plans.

## MASTER REMOTE WORK PROFESSIONAL CERTIFICATE COURSE

Table 1 shows the total number of participants who found remote work since October 2018. Jobs are grouped by region. Since the first cohort started in October 2018, a total of 150 remote jobs have been created in 20 different Utah counties. Additionally, there were 17 remote jobs created in other urban Utah counties, resulting in a total of 167 remote jobs with a county impact equivalent of 6,154. That is, out of 560 jobseekers actively looking for remote work, a total of 167 Utah participants found remote work.

**Table 1. Utah Total Job Placement for the MRWP Course by Region (October 2018 - November 2020)**

REGION	TOTAL JOBS FOUND
Southeast (Carbon, Daggett, Duchesne, Emery, Grand, San Juan, Uintah)	66
Southwest (Iron, Kane, Garfield, Piute, Rich, Wasatch, Washington)	38
Central (Beaver, Juab, Millard, Sanpete, Sevier, Wayne, Tooele)	46
Other counties	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>167</b>
<b>*County impact equivalent</b>	<b>6,154</b>



*\*The economic impact of creating these 167 remote jobs in rural counties is equivalent to 6,154 jobs in Wasatch Front counties (Utah Department of Workforce Services, 2016). Analysis based on the goal of reducing unemployment by 0.5%. Statistics based on the county labor force’s current rate of unemployment and extrapolated number of jobs required.*

## Success Stories



### **MRWP Course Helps Laid-Off Worker Get a Job and a Raise:**

*I had specific goals in mind when I took the Master Remote Work Certificate program to use my Bachelor of Science degree in Economics, with an Accounting minor, to find a job I could do*

*from home. Due to restructuring, I was laid off from a previous position. After five long months of unemployment and COVID standstill, I have been able to obtain a new position as a Payroll Controller. I do semimonthly payroll for over 200 employees. I am so excited about my employment, the new position, and the company in which I work! Besides making nearly a 40% pay increase, there are opportunities for new responsibilities, along with benefits and retirement! Thank you for helping me get my dream employment!*

**- VICKY KUYKENDALL, SAN JUAN COUNTY**

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*"We thought this would be a good course, but I have to say you have greatly exceeded our expectations. It was an amazing course that is well designed and was professionally delivered. My colleague and I were talking today, and he expressed the very same thoughts. The information we received in the course, along with what we just covered in the planning meeting, will be very valuable to me personally and to the people in our state."*

**- PEGGY, REMOTE WORK LEADER**

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### **Millard Resident Finds Full-Time Employment:**

*Right after a Town Hall meeting in Holden, I began looking for work and took the next remote-work class. Soon after starting my search, I had obtained a full-time remote position. The program helped*

*me so much with the ways to set up my home office, zoom meetings, and how to use Slack. The other information and programs I learned helped me get a great start on a new job.*

**- KRISTI BEAMS, MILLARD COUNTY**

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### **Training Helps Turn Setback to Success:**

*I recently started working for a company called Growing Market Share. It's a BDR (Business Development Relations) position, gathering market information and setting appointments part time. I will*

*be communicating mostly via phone, email, and chat with clients and fellow employees as well as file sharing using MS Office programs. I interviewed last fall and made it to the final interview but did not make the final cut.*

*I learned so much from the course and felt better prepared for entering the remote worker environment than last fall. My confidence level overall is stronger than before the course. Interacting on Slack, Zoom, and email throughout the ROI course provided valuable practice, and although this company I'm employed with uses different software for communicating, it feels familiar.*

**- KATIE LAMKIN, WASHINGTON COUNTY**

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### **New Federal Employee Helps Others Find Government Jobs:**

*I have been hired by the Federal Government as a Legal Administrative Assistant. The job also has Telework options assigned to it as allowed by the department. I searched*

*the usajobs.gov website to see what jobs were available. I created a profile and uploaded necessary documents and applied to position based on my skill set and experience. When navigating the website I was able to filter through the jobs that had telework attached to it and which ones were open to the public. After an over the phone interview, I was given an official job offer. There were many steps to this process and lots of waiting. The whole process from applying to the offer was over a span of about 2 months.*

*The ROI program prepared me for navigating websites, speaking with others virtually in group settings, and communicating via email with the proper etiquette. I am now taking this opportunity to help others with applying to the Federal Government!*

**- ALTHEA GILL, WASHINGTON COUNTY**

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A current student shared the following online: "I am so impressed at the layers of education they provide as well as the comprehension checks throughout the modules. This is way better than I expected!" A previous graduate replied, "In my opinion it just gets better as you go along. The interviews are gold."

**- JESSICA AND JOSH,  
PROFESSIONAL COURSE PARTICIPANTS**



**Experienced Remote Worker Boosts Salary:** I want to share with you my success story. I was a student in the Jan. 2020 Master Remote Work Professional course. Already a veteran of remote work for 6 years, this course was excellent in bringing

to light several productivity, collaboration and communication tools which I now incorporate into my daily workflow.

This course challenged me to build a professional portfolio, resume, and online presence. Having MRWP training and my personal work collateral in order gave me the confidence to approach my employer for a compensation update. Thank you to the whole USU Extension team for your hard work and in offering this course. With you and these skills, I was able to achieve north of 50% salary adjustment which feels great to have my hard work and dedication recognized.

**- KEVIN FRANKE, GRAND COUNTY**



**Utah Company Hires ROI Accounting Specialist:** I put in an application with LedgerGurus for an accounting specialist position. They had quite a process after the initial application, including follow-up email questions and multiple

interviews. I used my Zoom skills for my first web interviews. After a third interview with the COO, I was offered the job. Thank you for your training and support.

**- CARRI BECK, IRON COUNTY**



## MASTER REMOTE WORK LEADER CERTIFICATE COURSE

The April 2020 cohort participants received a short follow-up survey (N = 22) six months after course completion. With a response rate of 41%, nine participants completed the survey (n = 9). Results showed most participants (68%) created approximately 17 remote work positions in their organizations. All participants (100%) who hired remote workers were satisfied with this decision. Continued follow-up surveys will be sent to participants six months and one year after course completion. Data collection on further medium and long-term outcomes is currently ongoing since the MRWL course is offered every other month.

## Business Spotlight

A total of 137 business leaders and remote-work leaders are now part of ROI's Slack network. Several of these businesses regularly share job postings with ROI participants and alumni in rural Utah.

One example of a forward-thinking business that has begun hiring rural residents is Sutter Health. With eight of the 25 largest call center employers in Salt Lake City, the company held exploratory meetings and county/city visits in February and July of 2019 to explore rural opportunities.

Upon recruiting employees in rural Utah, Sutter Health expected a 30% fallout between job offers to the first day of training. The actual fallout was under 6%, with 17 of 18 hires beginning training. A total of 12 candidates were actively employed after 90 days, a 70% retention rate. For one sample position in Cedar City, they had a flow of six applicants per day over 22 days the positions were open. Employee engagement and performance have been demonstrated by positive metrics and eagerness to promote their employer to friends and family.



## COVID-19 AND REMOTE WORK

In response to COVID-19, we sent a short survey to past graduates and current participants of the MRWP and MRWL courses (N = 1,400) in April 2020 and asked about their remote work status during COVID-19. With a 27% response rate, 372 participants (n = 372) responded to the survey. With respect to the MRWP course (n = 341), about 36% (123 participants) began working remotely in response to COVID-19.

For the MRWL course (n = 31), about 45% (14 participants) indicated that their company created a remote work policy in response to COVID-19. Additionally, 74% of participants said their company transitioned on-site employees to remote work in response to COVID-19.

# ENGAGEMENT



To encourage participation in the MRWP and MRWL courses, the ROI team focuses efforts on marketing and information dissemination. Aggregate engagement efforts are displayed in Tables 2 and 3.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Table 2. Marketing Statistics for the MRWP and MRWL Certificate Courses

TYPE OF EVENT / TOOL	TYPE OF ENGAGEMENT	TOTAL ENGAGEMENT
Media stories/articles	Monthly	46, with national articles
Newsletter	Weekly distribution	Weekly subscribers; 2,948
Podcast episodes	Monthly	27 episodes; 3,045 downloads
Social media	Daily engagement	1,031 subscribers; 5 social media platforms
Specialized training job spotlights	Monthly	310 participants

## TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

Table 3. ROI Courses and Trainings

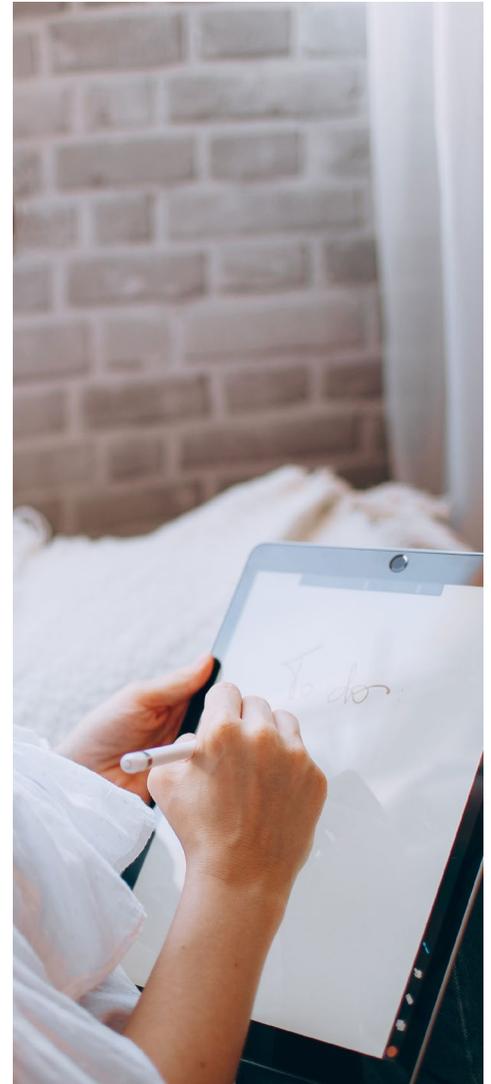
TYPE OF TRAINING	TOTAL NUMBER OF TIMES OFFERED	TOTAL PARTICIPANTS
Master Remote Work Professional Certification	24 course cohorts	1,438
Master Remote Work Leader Certification	5 course cohorts (including pilot)	104
Amazon E-commerce Entrepreneurship Workshops	2	55
One-on-one career coaching meetings	Individual sessions (as needed)	Over 400
Skill scholarships	Individual basis (as required)	142

## OTHER ENGAGEMENT

Scholarly engagement includes peer-reviewed articles published in academic journals. Additionally, members of the ROI team often present topics related to remote work and program evaluation at national and international academic Extension conferences (see Appendix for list). Professional reports authored by ROI members are also included in the Appendix. Table 4 gives an overview of this engagement.

**Table 4. Other Scholarly and Professional Engagement**

TYPE OF ENGAGEMENT	NUMBER	JOURNAL/ CONFERENCE/ REPORT
Research publications	3	Journal of Extension
		Journal of Human Sciences and Extension
National conference presentations	9	Joint Council of Extension Professionals (JCEP)
		National Council for Workforce Education (NCWE)
		National Association of Extension Program and Staff Development Professionals Conference (NAEPSDP)
		Epsilon Sigma Phi National Conference (ESP)
		National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals Annual Meeting (NACDEP)
		Association of International Agricultural and Extension Education Annual Conference (AIAEE)
United Nations 68th Civil Society Conference		
Professional reports	2	Strategic Plan of Excellence
		Contributions to Hanover Research

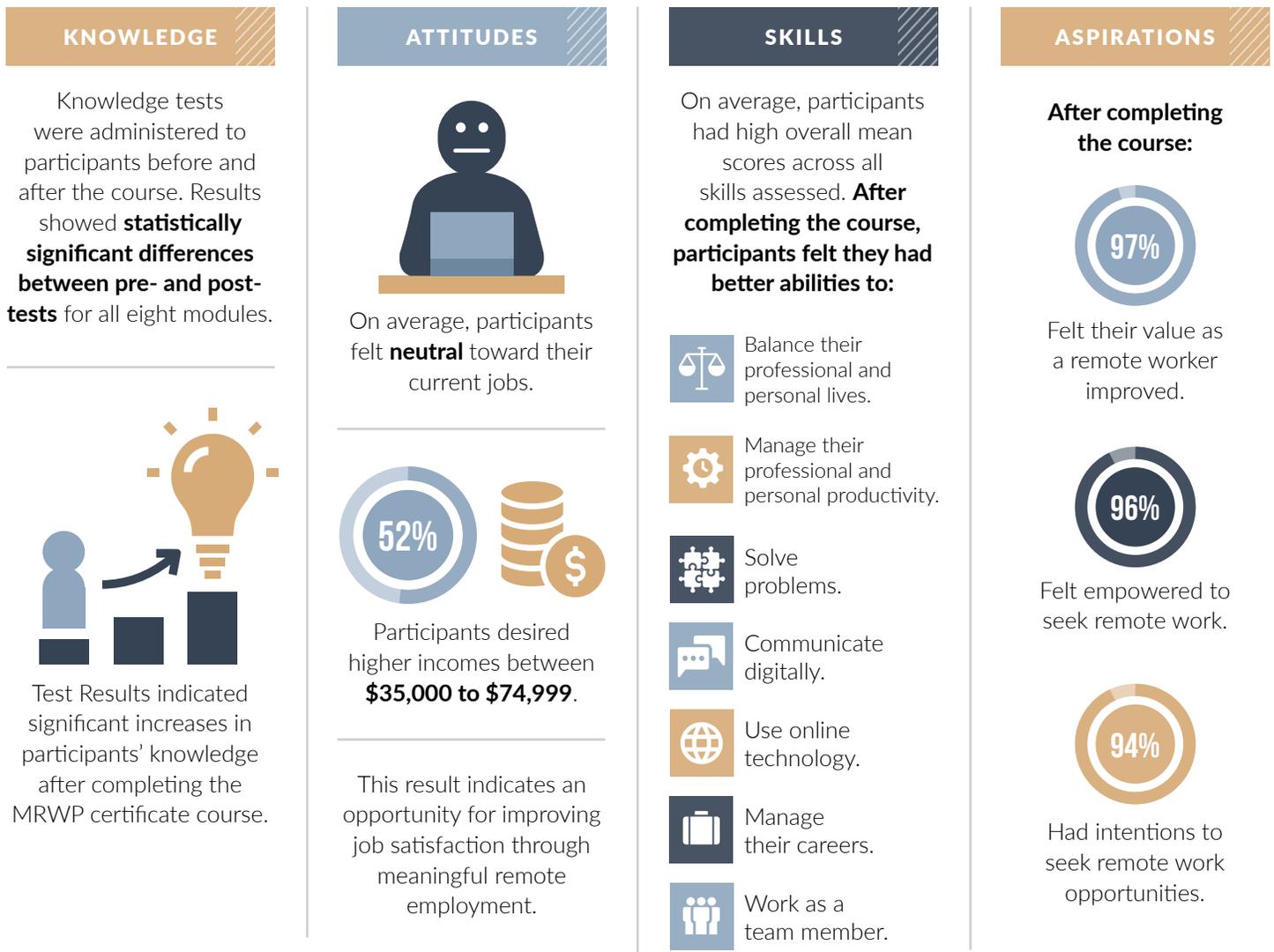


# OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS

## MASTER REMOTE WORK PROFESSIONAL CERTIFICATE COURSE

### Participant Outcomes

Since October 2018, about 1,280 participants have completed the MRWP certificate course. An evaluation of short- and medium-term outcomes captured changes in participants' knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations toward seeking remote employment. The results:



Although 63% of participants did not have remote work experience, most (92%) indicated it was important or very important to them to acquire remote work skills. About 51% of participants did not believe job opportunities were available in their local region that matched their long-term goals. When asked about ideal employment situations, most participants said flexible hours (81%), good manager relationship (77%), and personal growth (76%) were most important.

Continued assessment of participants' knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspirations, and perceptions towards remote work will further inform program areas that require improvement.

## Economic Impact

A second short survey was sent to all 587 graduates of the MRWP's September 2019 to August 2020 cohorts (N = 587). With a response rate of 40%, a total of 234 graduates completed the survey (n = 234).

### VALUE ADDED



Participants who live outside the rural Utah counties in the ROI service area paid roughly \$100 to take the course.



More than half of the respondents (56%) indicated that the course was worth 41% more than what they paid.

This result indicates that participants who paid for enrollment thought **the personal benefit of completing the course was worth more than the registration cost.**

### REMOTE JOBS



27% of participants (61 graduates) who responded to this survey successfully found remote work.

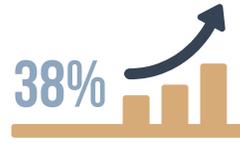


Of those who did not find remote work, 90% said they were confident in their ability to find remote work.



In addition to the survey, follow-up communication with past students reported 167 participants who found remote work since October 2018.

### INCOME GENERATED



Overall, a participant who found remote work experienced a 38% increase in median salary.

Across all participants who found remote work, total salaries increased 22% after completing the MRWP course.



### ANTICIPATED INCOME

Roughly two-thirds of participants who found remote work believed their median salaries would likely increase by 20% over the next year. This suggests the state government, cities, and counties can expect an anticipated increase in tax revenue from remote workers in the next fiscal year.

### COMMUTE

80%



This decline in participants who drove to work resulted in an 80% total reduction in the number of miles driven per month across all participants who found remote work.



Across all participants who found remote work, they realized a personal savings of \$997 per month due to lower fuel expenses.



This commute savings further resulted in a reduction of 3.34 metric tons of carbon emissions per month. Additionally, reduced traffic congestion helps promote clean air quality as remote workers drive fewer miles.

# MASTER REMOTE WORK LEADER CERTIFICATE COURSE

## Participant Outcomes

Since the MRWL course is offered every other month, participant outcomes are reflective of the April, June, September, and November 2020 cohorts. Overall, 104 participants enrolled in the MRWL certificate course with 91 successfully completing the course. An evaluation of short- and medium-term outcomes captured changes in participants' knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations toward creating remote work environments in their organizations. The results:

### KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge tests were administered to participants before and after the course. Results showed **statistically significant differences between pre- and post-tests** for all seven modules.



Test results indicated significant increases in participants' knowledge after completing the MRWL certificate course.

### ATTITUDES

All participants (100%) felt the creation of a remote work environment was important to their organization. Overall, participants felt favorably toward creating remote work environments in their organizations.

Participants were asked about their level of agreement regarding creating a remote work environment with respect to the attributes of an innovation (Rogers, 2003).

The results indicated that participants perceived remote work practices as:

**Better than their current practices.**

**Consistent with their existing values and experiences.**

**Somewhat difficult to implement.**

**Highly visible as other businesses engage in remote work.**

**Possible to implement on a trial basis.**

### SKILLS

On average, participants had high overall mean scores across all skills assessed. **After completing the course, participants felt they had better abilities to:**

 Influence a remote work culture within their organization.

 Communicate with remote employees.

 Manage remote employees' performance.

 Manage change.

 Lead with a vision within remote work environments

 Inspire learning and development within a remote work environment.

 Manage conflict within a remote work environment.

### ASPIRATIONS

#### After completing the course:

Almost all participants **(99%)** felt their value as a remote work leader improved.

**94%** felt empowered to hire remote workers.

#### Prior to course completion:

**71%** of participants indicated they would likely create remote work positions.

**51%** said they would likely hire qualified remote workers from Utah.

About **95%** of participants thought remote work was important to the future of talent-acquisition.

**85%** thought creating a remote work environment in their organization was beneficial for a sustained competitive advantage.



Upon course completion, we once again asked participants how likely they were to engage in remote work practices. About 91% said they were likely to create remote work job positions in their organizations, and 63% said they would likely hire qualified remote workers from rural Utah. About 98% thought remote work was important to the future of talent acquisition.

Continued assessment of participants' knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspirations, and perceptions towards remote work will further inform program areas that require improvement.

# FUTURE PLANS

As described previously, the ROI program has expanded significantly since its inception, offering new and revised courses to meet evolving training needs in Utah and to actively support residents of Utah struggling with the transition to remote work required by the COVID-19 pandemic. Future plans include the following:



## **Pilot the revised Master Remote Work Professional course for incarcerated populations.**

The initial pilot is underway at the Garfield County Jail, and inmates preparing for release from prison are receiving training in sessions moderated by an ROI program coordinator. An estimated 68% of released prisoners were arrested within three years. Studies have found these rates to significantly decline when released prisoners can find employment with a livable wage, and those who participate in an education program while incarcerated are 20% less likely to reoffend.



## **Expand the Remote Work Leadership course in urban Utah with federal funding from the Economic Development Administration.**

With potential funding from the Economic Development Administration, the ROI program would expand the Master Remote Work Leader (MRWL) certificate course to specifically target business leaders in urban counties. We would hire two new program coordinators to coach and train businesses leaders in developing and implementing remote work plans. In addition, we would connect them to certified remote work professionals they can hire who are in rural Utah.



**Update existing courses to reflect remote work trends and changes.** As the governor noted in an executive order, approximately 40% of Utah's workforce worked remotely during the pandemic. For many, the change was mandated but didn't include accompanying training in essential remote-work skills in communication, collaboration, time management, and management.



**Contribute actively to the Rural Workforce Network.** The Rural Workforce Network is a partnership between the Salt Lake Chamber, Utah Department of Workforce Services, Economic Development Corporation of Utah, GOED, and Utah State University Extension. Many businesses along the Wasatch Front are struggling to find the personnel required to thrive, and yet many rural areas are struggling for employment opportunities. Through a geographical shift, and perhaps a shift in mindset as well, the workforce demands of the Wasatch Front and the employment needs of rural Utah can connect to ease the concerns of both regions. The Chamber Rural Workforce Network's goal is to fulfill this need. <https://slchamber.com/rural-workforce-network/>



**Support Executive Orders 2021-03 and 2021-04.** The ROI program will provide training and strategic support for statewide efforts to increase remote work opportunities and move jobs to rural Utah. Specific efforts will include:

- Inviting business leaders with remote-work opportunities to highlight remote-work offerings at monthly Job Spotlight events with past ROI graduates.
- Offer monthly one-on-one coaching sessions and job search support for participants who have completed training and want to find remote work.
- Encourage participants to register with the Division of Workforce Services (DWS) and utilize its services.

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# APPENDIX

## Journal Articles

- Hill, P. A., Ali, A. D., Narine, L. K., Spielmaker, D. M., & Schmutz, A. T. (2020). *Evaluating Utah's Rural Online Initiative: Empowering rural communities through remote work*. *Journal of Extension*, 58(5). <https://joe.org/joe/2020october/rb4.php>
- Hill, P. A., Ali, A. D., Narine, L. K., Schmutz, A., Riskas, T., & Spielmaker, D. (In review). *Evaluating Utah's Rural Online Initiative: Empowering organizational leaders through remote work*. [Manuscript submitted for publication]. Utah State University Extension.
- Schmutz, A. T., Campbell, A., Bean, A., Ali, A. D., Hill, P. A., & Swadley, E. A. (In review). *Preparing rural youth for the future of work: Responding to migration trends through remote work education*. [Manuscript submitted for publication]. Utah State University Extension.

## Conference Presentations

- Ali, A. D., & Hill, P. A. (2020, December 1–3). *Formative evaluation of a remote work program for Utah organizational leaders* [Paper presentation]. National Association of Extension Program and Staff Development Professionals Conference and Annual Meeting, Fort Lauderdale, FL, United States. (Virtual conference). <https://naepsdp.org/event-3976959>
- Hill, P. A., Ali, A. D., Narine, L. K., Goodrich, R., & Swadley, E. (2020, October 6–8). *Utah's Rural Online Initiative: Training urban business leaders to hire remote workers from rural counties* [Paper presentation]. Epsilon Sigma Phi National Conference, Rochester, NY, United States. (Virtual conference). <https://espnational.org/2020-ESP-National-Conference>
- Ali, A. D., Hill, P. A., Swadley, E., & Narine, L. K. (2020, June 1–2). *Rethinking communication in Extension: A hybrid model for engaging with rural audiences* [Conference workshop]. National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals 16th Annual Meeting, Portsmouth, NH, United States. (Virtual conference). <https://www.nacdep.net/2020-nacdep-conference>
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