

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many businesses have had to conduct their work remotely or online. This has created many advantages and disadvantages for both businesses and customers including 1) convenience, 2) lack of security 3) loss of in-person connections, and 4) technical challenges.

Business online has created convenience for many employees. Remote transactions can create efficiency for a company and allow them to connect with people from around the world. Many employees no longer have to commute to work and instead, walk across the room to their desk (Jacobson, 2020). However, the lack of interaction can cause employees to lose their motivation to work hard. Chuck Dawsey stated: "from my experience I have found that there are few people who are disciplined enough to effectively work from home and provide fair services for compensation received" (2020).

Working remotely opens opportunities for hacked emails, stolen passwords, and deleted documents. "The more transactions which are conducted electronically the greater the risk of outside influences and electronic meddling or hacking" (Dawsey, 2020). There are ways to protect against online threats, but lack of user knowledge and lack of personal guidance for those users can be disastrous.

Business online eliminates the risk of spreading the virus, but it also eliminates in-person connections. Most businesses depend on personal relationships to develop a sense of trust and integrity with their customers. Benton REA develops this trust through excellent personal service and face-to-face interactions. Although remote transactions may seem more efficient, "it certainly doesn't bode well for developing those lasting business relationships" (Dawsey, 2020).

Working remotely brings many technical challenges. Most businesses had to close their doors without much warning. Many were not prepared with the technical knowledge, employee training, equipment, policies, or procedure needed to run business online. Many employees also deal with inadequate bandwidth which they share with other employees and students working from home.

Benton REA plays a vital role in the COVID-19 recovery because "electricity and internet access are critical infrastructures" (Bradshaw 2020). On March 17th, 2020, Benton REA closed its Prosser and West Richland offices and community rooms to the public and staggered employee shifts. Personnel were accessible by phone and all departments continued operating "to maintain services and restore any outages" during the office closure. Benton REA lost the personal services that they prided themselves on for over 70 years and were forced to detach from their community when the community needed them most.

To restore this connection and support, Benton REA might follow what other businesses (Walmart and Costco) have already done: re-open their offices and services with proper COVID-19 safety protocols in place. They could reinstate their in-house computer repair services, personal on-sight computer consulting, and personal service to its electrical consumers all with masks and gloves. Most importantly, Benton REA could act as an example to our local businesses on how to safely re-open their offices as well. "We know Benton REA's core job is to keep the lights on, but our passion is our community" (Bradshaw 2020).

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