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During COVID-19, many businesses have resorted to conducting all or most of their business online and/or remotely. Explain the advantages and disadvantages of doing all business online and/or remotely. Include items such as convenience versus security, safety versus the importance of in-person connections, and the technical challenges of conducting businesses online and/or remotely. In addition, please tell us how you think Benton REA can assist local business or can best participate in the COVID-19 recovery efforts for small businesses and members. Please provide specific examples and utilize information from www.bentonrea.org to include current and new areas in which you believe Benton REA could use its resources to assist local communities.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has been hard for everyone. Schools have been closed, public gatherings have been restricted, and many businesses, large and small, have had to adapt to conducting much of their business online and/or remotely. Compared to operating in-person, doing business online has distinct advantages and disadvantages.

An advantage to remote operation is how it prioritizes people's safety. According to the CDC, "COVID-19 spreads mainly among people who are in close contact (within about 6 feet) for a prolonged period" (CDC). While it keeps employees safe, a disadvantage of remote operation is that creating and maintaining in-person connections is more difficult when people aren't interacting face to face, communicating non-verbally as well as verbally. I'm on the autism spectrum, and as such, regular social interactions are vital for my personal development. For example, in the past I have learned valuable social cues and subject information from my peers. Now, with everyone's cameras off, I feel the teacher and I are the only ones in the room. Conducting business remotely runs the risk of losing the synergy of human connection.

However, Working from home allows both employers and employees increased flexibility and productivity. According to flexjobs.com, remote workers are 35% to 40% more

productive than those that work in an office, and “95% of respondents say that their productivity has been higher or the same working from home, and 51% report being more productive when working remotely (Courtney).

There are also many technical challenges that come with operating from a distance. Bad internet due to faulty connection or hardware can degrade the learning experience. Online data can be hacked. Programs like Benton REA’s PowerNet services are especially crucial during this pandemic, where many people require fast and reliable internet for their work.

Benton REA has already done a lot to assist its members and small businesses. As part of their COVID-19 Member Support Program, Benton REA made the decision to forgive late fees and not to suspend internet and power connections due to nonpayment, before it was mandated by Governor Inslee (Benton REA). Additionally, Benton REA offers several other discounts and programs to help those in need, including the Power To Care Bill Assistance Program, in which members can round up their monthly power bill to help other members pay their past-due electric bills. Bentonrea.org states that “From September 1 to October 31, 2020, Benton REA members contributed \$2,284.12 to the Power To Care fund.” This amount was matched by Benton REA, for a total of \$4,568 going directly to members all over Benton, Yakima, and Lewis counties (Benton REA).

Small businesses are a massive part of our economy, accounting for 44% of the total U.S. economic output (Doré). Steven Hamilton, an economist at George Washington University, estimates that 420,000 U.S. small businesses had closed permanently by July 10 (Wiseman). Benton REA, through its PowerNET service, is also supporting small businesses by providing reliable and affordable internet packages, enabling them to continue operation.

In this especially difficult time, holding off on a disconnection could mean the difference between a small business' success and closure. Benton REA has continued to do a wonderful job of providing reliable and affordable electricity and internet services to its members and also an extra measure of flexibility and financial support to those in need. Along with the support to members already mentioned, Benton REA should not lose sight of the value of one-on-one human connections shared between trustees and members alike, via our annual meetings. Thank you, Benton REA, for going the extra kilowatt hour, and serving my family, and so many others, when we need it most.

Works Cited

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