

## Mission is Possible

### Creating a Vision for the Future of Work

**Sasha O'Connell:** Hello, I'm Sasha O'Connell and I'm thrilled to welcome you to *Mission Is Possible*, a series of audio episodes, where we break down and dig into the management issues of relevance to the national security community. This is a joint project between Guidehouse and the School of Public Affairs at American University. We are pleased to have you join us.

Over the last two plus years, we all, whether it's public sector, private sector, state, local, the educational sector, have all had to adapt to changing societal norms and values, specifically as it relates to work and the work environment. Today, we are experiencing a really unique moment in time. One where we have an opportunity to take a step back and reflect on those last couple years and consider what we want to take forward with us in terms of innovation and long-term implementation.

In this episode, we will explore specifically how the Department of State, the nation's lead diplomacy agency, embraced these exact challenges and has created a vision for the future of work and is navigating challenging talent and workforce dynamics to embrace a hybrid work culture. I am so thrilled, joining us today, we have Janice deGarmo. Janice currently serves as the Director of the Office of Management Strategy and Solutions, where she is focused on providing strategic insights and solutions to help improve the State Department's management platform and advanced foreign policy goals. In this capacity, Janice oversees directorates that focus on the center for analytics, the consulting and advanced project directorate, and policy and global presence. Janice, thank you so much for joining us on *Mission Is Possible*. It is so great to have you with us.

**Janice deGarmo:** Thanks so much for having me. I'm so excited to be here.

**Sasha O'Connell:** Awesome. And I know you have such an interesting background in terms of your career. And I know that those experiences have really informed your perspective on the future of work. So, I was hoping you could tell us, I have the benefit of your bio in front of me, but for our listeners, a little bit more about your past history, in terms of your experiences, and maybe some hints about how this has all informed your perspective on the new horizons we see in terms of the future of work, before we kick off.

**Janice deGarmo:** This summer, I will have completed 20 years in federal government. And as I look back at my experience through agencies, I've spent some time at the Department of Labor, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and I spent a lot of time here at the Department of State. While I was at the Department of Labor, I was lucky enough to also get my Master of Business Administration, my MBA, at the University of Maryland, while I was there.

And I would tell you one thing that threads together all of my roles in federal government has been that they've really focused on the business of government. Which is why I am so excited to be here today, because I think we can all agree that there's probably tons of podcasts that focus on our important policy issues. And those are, obviously so critical and there's so much to do there. But there's very few that focus on how does the business of government function and how can we maximize how we function to get ultimate results? So, I think it's a perfect lead in for today as we think about the future of

work, because at the very heart of the future of work is thinking about how we can work differently to ultimately drive results and outcomes for the federal government.

**Sasha O'Connell:** That's awesome. And I'm always so pleased to talk to folks who share my passion for the business of government and how it works. And thank you for your amazing service, also. Such an incredible career.

So, digging right in, and to your point, the pandemic has, obviously, as I mentioned at the top of the episode, affected everybody. No sector has been immune. But can you talk a little bit, having been in the seat where you are at State, what do you think are those unique challenges in terms of the federal government's approach and response?

**Janice deGarmo:** That's a great question. What people may not realize is that government agencies aren't actually that different from other sectors, at least operationally. Yes, we have an obligation to the American people and to the taxpayer to further our U.S. diplomatic mission. But, the very heart of how we do that is not unlike a lot of other sectors. That most important asset is our people. And that is a common thread across industry and public sector. And the truth is we're all competing for the best and brightest, especially as we think about the knowledge workers that employ some of these global organizations. I think that it's really important that at the end of the day we put the employee experience and combine that with the mission at the very center of our business strategy and then work from there.

For State Department, we are, again, a global organization. We have 77,000 employees at over 270 embassies and consulates in 195 countries around the world. And domestically alone, we have about 36,000. And we're not just in D.C. We actually have about 150 facilities in the United States. That's a fun fact I don't think everyone's aware of. So, when the pandemic hit, we, just like everyone else across the federal government and industry and other sectors, had to work differently, whether we were ready for it or not. And so, I would say maybe other sectors were maybe more prepared for some of this. I think State Department really rose to the occasion. I would say our CIO and technology platform had to level up very quickly. And we were able to do that, as well as our other admin functions, thinking about how we needed to work in this new way. But I think what we found is that we can work in this new way and still propel our mission forward and improve the employee experience while we're doing it.

I guess I would say, if you wanted to say how we're unique, it's a little bit harder for us to experiment in ways like this. And COVID allowed us to experiment and lean in on new ways of working because we really had to. And then as we've went through it, it wasn't only three months into the pandemic that we said, "Wow. Let's make sure... This is a horrendous experience for the globe, but maybe there's some silver lining on how we think about this within State Department and modernizing how we work. And let's bounce forward post-COVID. Let's not bounce back, but let's bounce forward, to make sure that we can institutionalize lessons learned and what worked well and really run with it." I would say we're still doing that. We're iterating, we're learning through COVID. But at the heart of it, we are focusing on our most important asset, and that's our people.

**Sasha O'Connell:** So interesting. Your point is so well taken from a person perspective, an employee perspective, and the context of the war for talent that the federal government is in, being able to offer this flexibility in creating that opportunity. I saw the OPM Director testified that she is seeing, across

government, folks moving toward departments and agencies that are offering some of this flexibility, sustaining that coming out of COVID and that it is being, there's demand signals that for the next generation looking to come into government. They're interested in this. So, I think it's such an interesting and core point, to your point, that cuts across all industries.

What do you say to folks on the flip side of, okay, but you get these amazing people, and they need to be managed? And how do you manage in a hybrid or remote work environment? What are the challenges there? Again, you guys are global, it's a particularly interesting in this context. What are some of your thoughts on that management side of the equation?

**Janice deGarmo:** Sasha, that's a really great question. That's very real. I don't think it is any surprise here that there are differences in executives and employees and how they think about the future of work. There're loads of evidence and reasoning for this, but let's be clear. This is changing for a lot of industries and a lot of sectors. This is changing hundreds of years of how we've worked. The State Department is 250 years old. We've worked in a certain way. How we are going to take this on has to be done in terms of managing hybrid work. The real management of it has to be done with intentionality and with a mission focus.

And I do think, along the way, comes the change management and some serious myth busting. That comes along with that. I often get that there's questions. And I think, you heard this at the hearing on future of work with the new OPM Director and you hear this in the news. There are sometimes folks that say, "This is such a new way of working in terms of hybrid work or remote work. And how do I really know my employees are working?" And we get this question a lot and often we turn to them and say, "Well, how did you know they were working before?"

**Sasha O'Connell:** Good point.

**Janice deGarmo:** "Were you standing over their shoulder? I don't think so. How do you know they weren't just in the office playing Candy Crush for hours?" So, at the end of the day, what we're trying to do, what any global organization wants to do with its people is, you know, it comes down to trust. We have to stop managing from presenteeism and activity, but moving to performance and outcomes. And that is so, so important. And something that I'd say is, there're just tons of research and evidence on this.

But as you said, Sasha, that war on talent is real. And I think as the OPM Director alluded to, we are seeing that people want to have a flexible environment. And if you follow the data, it is now the second most important factor for employment consideration. Second, only to salary. And I would say, for knowledge workers, it is a close tie. There has not been one interview that I have taken over the past year, that this question doesn't come up. "What State Department's view on hybrid or flexibility?" That's really important. But, let me get to what you're really asking, which is how State Department took this approach.

When it comes back to balancing onsite presence and hybrid and how we want to do it, we basically took an approach where we based the criteria on how to think about hybrid work on the mission and function of a particular position. And the idea there, and this sounds so obvious, the idea there is that

we really wanted to level set the field here. We wanted to, what we were hearing both from employees and managers, is that we don't know how to think about, in a post-COVID environment, what's the hybrid situation going to look like moving forward. So, we wanted to stop basing those decisions on manager preference because we were seeing real inequity in that, because there were some managers that were leaning in and some managers that just weren't comfortable because they didn't know how to do it.

But instead, we took the approach where we gave each of the managers a tool that enabled them to go through about eight or nine questions that were based on mission and function of the job. So it was objective criteria that we created. Everything from do you have to come in for classified work? Do you have to interact with the inter-agency that requires on-site presence? Real, objective criteria that's meaningful to State Department because we have that unique mission. And they went through every single position domestically and ranked it. And then that tool spit out a maximum telework score. And then managers and teams had the ability to calibrate. "Okay we have it at an individual level. Let's now calibrate for a team level expectation and move this forward." So, they've been living this for the past few months, and I will say, we still have so much work to do here. And, certainly we, again, are taking an iterative approach. But this makes a lot of sense.

We're all here to, ultimately, advance our mission. And that looks very different for someone who's a country desk officer who has to work with principals on the seventh floor that are on site or has to work with the intel community and that's, again, an onsite need, versus an IT specialist who needs a day at home to code all day. And I think what's critical to the success of this is that you don't take a one-size-fits-all approach. You take an approach based on mission and function of the job. And then moving forward with that, you move out of this concentric circle of, "Okay, I understand the hybrid schedule now for this team and employee. And now I want to make sure that I design policies and technology and workspaces that enable that hybrid work."

**Sasha O'Connell:** That was my next question, Janice, because I hear through the airwaves our listeners' ears perking up about this best practice. You are figuring out a way, as you said, which is challenging in the federal government, to figure out a way to do the things differently and to do things differently in terms of thinking about this, as you said, looking not about manager preference that can be driven by all kinds of variables. But, really looking at each role and responsibility in terms of outcomes, outputs, mission, focus, and really the needs and functions of that role, and going forward. And I was going to ask just that next question on behalf of our listeners. Did you need new policies to get this done? We can get to the tech too, but starting with the policy piece, was this about creating some new policies to allow this flexibility and creativity in terms of looking at roles? Or how did you tackle that internal policy piece?

**Janice deGarmo:** Oh yeah, no Sasha, 100%. If you want anything to be lasting and rooted into cultural change, you have to look at what policies need to be adjusted that get in the way of that. I feel very lucky that we have leadership here at State Department that's fully onboard with this and understands, and in fact, is part of the Secretary's modernization agenda that he put out last year, institutionalizing lessons learned from COVID to make sure we remain as agile as possible, is actually an initiative that he is moving forward. My team and I, as well as others in what I would say "management family" at the State Department, are working on that future of work plan. We're wrapping it up. But, within there it includes what policies, what workplace policies, do we need to change.

And so, I mentioned to you how we think about telework. The policy of how we're enabling telework and the criteria for thinking through telework is in there. I neglected to mention that the tool that we rolled out was for our domestic positions only. We have a bit of a unique environment overseas because of the security issues. But even for our overseas, we pushed out an overseas telework policy that says, "Hey, while we can't probably be as hybrid overseas because of our, again, security environment, we certainly need to make sure we're agile and resilient. So you need to make sure you have a situational telework policy that enables that." There have been other policies that we've looked at for core hours. Most agencies have set core hours that they probably have written into their own regulation. And we had to take a look at that and adjust our core hours. So those are workforce policies.

But we also have policies that we're looking at on the space side and on the technology side. We want to enable this hybrid workforce then we got to get laptops out to everyone. But let's be clear, if you're going to get a laptop, it doesn't make a whole lot of sense to also have a desktop. So, let's think about this smart and institute a laptop-first policy. And then similarly with space, I think the entire federal government is working through how we optimize our space. If you're teleworking two days or three days a week, maybe you don't need that gigantic office anymore. And so how do we work the policies? So, yes, incredibly important to think through this. And in our future of work plan, we have these three lines of effort, workforce changes and policies, technology, and then the real estate aspect of it.

**Sasha O'Connell:** That is fascinating and such tactical advice and help. I know for our listeners who are thinking about this, the core hours piece alone wouldn't be something I would think of in terms of just looking at an enabling policy that might need to be adjusted. Can we dig into that last piece, the tech piece, the laptop-first policy? Can you talk about adaptation and evolution of technology at the Department in this context? How has that gone? What are the challenges? What do you see going forward? What do you maybe recommend for some of our listeners also in the federal space?

**Janice deGarmo:** Technology is such a core piece of how we enable our workforce. Part of the reason I'm so excited to do this podcast is, if I were to say anything, my BLUF at the end of the day is that you cannot, as an agency, only just look at the telework piece. You will not be successful if you don't look at, again, putting the employee experience at the heart. Obviously, mission first. Employee experience. And then you make sure that the enabling piece of technology, workforce policies, and real estate all move concurrently with it. And so, for State Department, and I think some other agencies had moved ahead on this already, I will tell you that for State Department, COVID really pushed us into action on some of that enabling technology.

And the CIO and the organization information resource management really stepped up and leveled up on all of these needs. Everything from getting our laptops out. Every single employee needs to have a laptop and needs to move with them through their employee experience. That is something the State Department has been working on, and we did not have that prior to COVID. We're even working on how to think through secure comms for our domestic workforce. We are thinking through enabling Wi-Fi where we can. We are working on ensuring that we have collaboration tools that enable hybrid work environments.

Some of this sounds pretty obvious, but there's sometimes challenges, also with our security environment, on how we do some of this in government. All of those are in motion and are being thought through. All through in this future of work context. And how do we enable the modern



employee to advance our mission? And so, it's really important that that's part of your future of work plan, because I really do believe if you don't get that right you're not going to be successful. It will be very easy for a leader or manager, and I would say even as a manager myself, my team is mobile and is agile and is teleworking. If I can't get ahold of them at any given time and use the technology to my advantage to be connected, that's not going to work. So that's incredibly important.

**Sasha O'Connell:** You bet. Thanks for that. And again, your real boots on the ground, tactical breakdown of some of these issues, I know, is going to be super helpful for our listeners. Zooming out a bit from implementation and back to outcomes in the employee experience. What has your experience been, or what do you say to folks who worry about a hybrid, sort of going that direction as a future of work, is having a negative impact on efforts around diversity and inclusion? I don't know that we entirely know globally. But there's some concern that maybe this is setting those efforts back. What's your experience been there, or your thoughts about that going forward? Or how are you incorporating those really important values into your future of work plan?

**Janice deGarmo:** There has been so much research on this topic. Let me zoom out for one second, because this is an important point. And then, I'll get into your DEIA, the diversity and inclusion question.

One of the things that we did with leadership, and again, as part of the Secretary's modernization agenda and working on this future of work plan that my team has been leading with the rest of the management team. An important step we took is that we gained consensus from our senior leadership on the values that we were going to base our entire future of work plan in. What do we want to make sure that we build into our plan and that all of the changes that we're making consider these values? We came up with six values. The first being mission first.

We have to do all of this and can't compromise our mission. That's an obvious one, but important to put forward. Make sure that this is advancing our mission and for the American public but doing it in a way that ensures we can retain and recruit the best and brightest diplomatic corp. That was our first value. The second value was connectedness. That gets to some the pieces I mentioned on technology and maximizing our togetherness when we are on site. The third one, and you'll see where I'm getting here, is DEIA, diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. And the idea there is that DEIA considerations need to be embedded into everything we do. And it is important when you think about how you are changing the way you work, that DEIA is imbued into that thinking and process change.

I will say, we have an incredible Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, Ambassador Abercrombie-Winstanley, and she often speaks about the importance of transparency, accountability, and intentionality. And that intentionality is incredibly important and thinking through that in your future of work and how we do things. I would say, I have some real tactical examples of how we're doing this, but I will tell you that there is just mounting evidence that actually, flexibility, and workplace flexibility, is actually demanded more from certain demographics than from others. And there's incredible evidence, certainly for caregivers and for women, but there are other demographics that really benefit from those flexibilities. There are also various studies that show, and I can speak to this with my own evidence, is that, when you post a job with either it being location-agnostic or flexibility is included, you get six times the applications that you would do if it was an in-person job only.

So, you are widening the pool when you can. If you think about diversity, and the diversity of thought even, and diversity of skillset and getting to a broader pool, those workplace flexibilities really make a difference. But, in our plan and specifically, we are tying those DEIA threads throughout all of our three lines of efforts, whether it's remote work opportunities to capture these different geographic/demographics, whether it's ensuring that when you do have a hybrid meeting that you think about it in an inclusive way. It's very easy to forget about the people on the screen.

So, we had to actually work templates on how to do this work and make sure that you think through that inclusive meeting. Similarly, accessible workspaces and technology have to have that DEIA thread throughout. We are making sure that's included in all of our planning. It's really, really important, but it really does take intentionality. You have to think through that when you're planning.

I will just tell you just the other three values that we worked on with our senior leadership that guide our future of work plan. So, I said, mission first, connectedness, DEIA, respect and trust. So, this gets to this issue of a trust-based culture that values outcomes and results. Excellence and expertise. And then decisive leadership. I think those were important values to align on at a leader level so that we could move forward with our planning.

**Sasha O'Connell:** That's amazing and so inspirational in terms of your intentionality in all of those areas. I'm a big fan too, in my government strategic planning days of really writing those things down. Sometimes we take for granted those values but documenting those and bringing them along with us in a really, as you said, intentional way through these change processes can have such a great impact.

So, before we go on, I have to ask, you've mentioned the importance of connectedness a couple of times. Can you expand on that a bit?

**Janice deGarmo:** So after we thought long and hard about creating objective criteria for how much telework is appropriate for any given job function and giving managers a tool to help them navigate that, we then embarked on a lot of change management sessions with our leaders and managers to think through, "All right, let's make sure when they are coming in, that we're maximizing that value proposition, that we're coming in for a purpose." And what are these types of functions that we should think about? What are these types of tasks that can optimize that time in the office together? And so, we came up with the five Cs of connectedness. I actually don't know that we came up with it. We may have seen it somewhere else and latched onto it because I thought it was pretty good for a way for managers to just think about it. So, these five Cs are where office engagement is most optimized.

The first is connection, right? Team lunches, coffee chats, career conversations. The second is creation. This is about idea generation and innovative creative processes that really can work very well being together. Now, it's not to say that it doesn't work being hybrid or being remote, but that is one time to think, really have a hard thought of like, okay, this is one function that I should really think about having employees in.

Second is collaboration. I would say this is not a black and white, if you're collaborating you come in, but it is a type of activity that you should think through. Are you having a strategic review? Are you having a leader-team huddle. That might be better for being in person. Or are you problem solving where

sometimes actually that virtual environment is better because you can throw up a collaborative document real time. So collaboration is another.

The second to last is critical tasks. So, obviously, this is huge for state department. So thinking of some of our sensitive conversations, our in-person technology, and classified functions that just you cannot take offsite, or even equipment maintenance for some of those other functions in administration.

And then, the last one is celebration. I think this is really, really important to bring your teams together. Personally, I've done a lot of Zoom and Teams virtual celebrations, and they're great, but I still think being together in person to celebrate is hard to replace.

So that's where we got some of that real tactical advice out to our managers. And I think it's been helpful. And I think we're, again, iterating and learning along the way.

**Sasha O'Connell:** Well, this has been amazing. Before I let you go, I know we're almost out of time, I'd be remiss not to ask, I know our listeners are dying to know, too, we talked about the internal impact and how to support your workforce, your incredible workforce in this. Also, just curious, if you can, this probably is a separate podcast, but maybe a quick answer on this, too. How is it working in terms of your mission and that externally focused piece? What does digital diplomacy look like for State Department? And how has that impacted the ability to do those interactions overseas? Can you talk just a little bit about that before we let you go?

**Janice deGarmo:** Yeah, that is a super great point because a lot of the future of work planning, some of it is domestically focused, but that word "agility" is really important here because how we think of future of work overseas is through, again, we can't take as much advantage of hybrid work overseas because of the security landscape in which many of our diplomats are working, so that onsite presence is pretty important. But we do think about it in terms of agility and digital diplomacy. And ensuring that our diplomats can get out behind embassy walls, when appropriate, and do what they're best at doing, building strategic relationships, advancing diplomacy. So that's how we think about our future of work overseas. I would say, digital diplomacy isn't necessarily a new concept. I think over the 20 plus years, we would, between email and websites and social media and blogs and Facebook and Twitter, all of these new tools challenge the way things were done overseas, but have opened really great new opportunities.

So, this is no different. We're treating the pandemic as a way to say, "Let's make sure that our diplomats are enabled to conduct expeditionary diplomacy and get out and be mobile and agile where they can." That's how we think about it. All of this empowers us to be resilient. Who knows what kind of once in a lifetime event we're going to have again next year. And so, let's be resilient and agile in the face of vulnerability and be able to still meet our mission.

I'm just excited. We are doing just a ton of work at State Department in modernizing how we work domestically, overseas, and it's going to make waves for generations to come in a really lasting way. So, I'm excited about it.

**Sasha O'Connell:** Well, your excitement is contagious. It's been amazing to get to talk to you, both to hear the big picture vision and then also, as you said on the onset, I love, vision is one thing, but where





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does the rubber meet the road and all the work you guys are doing from policy implementation to your hiring practices, to the technology, to facilities, and really thinking through those details gave us both that vision and some really tactical advice. Thank you so much for joining us today. It's been a pleasure having you on *Mission Is Possible*.

**Janice deGarmo:** Thank you so much, Sasha. It was such a pleasure.

**Sasha O'Connell:** I'd like to thank Janice deGarmo for her time and for sharing her thoughts and insights into this critically important topic of future of work. Thank you for joining us for this episode of *Mission Is Possible*. To find out more information on the Guidehouse/American University *Mission Is Possible* speaker series, please visit us at [guidehouse.com](http://guidehouse.com).