

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Managing Remote Work

On this episode of First State Insights, Sarah Ruffcorn, President of Trinity Logistics, speaks with Troy Mix, Associate Director of the University of Delaware's Institute for Public Administration (IPA), about her team's ongoing adjustment to the remote work environment. Topics covered in this November 12, 2020 interview include strategies Sarah and her team have used to maintain a workplace culture, efforts to enhance internal and external communication, and key lessons learned from managing through the stress and uncertainty of the pandemic.

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[Trinity Logistics Goes Remote \(2:05 Start Listening Here\)](#)

Troy Mix: Sarah. Thanks for joining today. I appreciate you taking time.

Sarah Ruffcorn: Thank you, Troy, for having me. Appreciate it.

Troy Mix: I wanted to talk about remote work, and before we dive into that discussion, could you tell listeners enough about what Trinity does so [the audience] can kind of understand what the day-to-day is and what you're trying to accomplish?

Sarah Ruffcorn: Absolutely. Here at Trinity logistics, we are a 3PL. We plan and route freight all over the country, and even internationally. We have been in business for well over 40 years, and are actually now a part of the Burriss Logistics company, which has been in business over 90 years. We have a lot of experience across the company, in transportation and supply chain management. We're excited to launch into this world of remote work, although we've actually been doing it for a little while. I'm excited to share our experiences with this.



Troy Mix: I kind of have a memory that March 12th was the day that I was told not to come back to the office for a while and maybe it was close to that date for a lot of organizations. You said...you had been doing it for a while now so I'm curious what that "go home" message looked like. How it was delivered and how well positioned were you to make that transition?

Sarah Ruffcorn: Yeah, so we have had some positions, for the last several years, be 100 percent [remote], and we've also had some telecommuting positions as well. For some of our admin functions, billing, certain positions we've said, "let's take a look at each position individually and see, where does this model work well, and where do we need a high level of collaboration?" Through the years, we've kind of looked at these different positions to say, where does this make sense? Although now that we've kind of launched into this new world, we've had to take a really harder and deeper look at that than we've ever had before, just like many organizations have had.

But I will say that we spent a lot of time through the last 10 years setting up disaster preparedness plans and through all of our planning over the last, seven years preparing for potential hurricanes. I remember one hurricane that came through several years ago when we actually flew a group out to Kansas city and sent everybody else home to work, so we've had different mini instances if you will, to kind of practice what that 100 percent remote workforce looks like and have spent a lot of time and effort and energy planning for those types of events.

Troy Mix: In preparing for disasters over the last 10 years, were pandemics part of that preparation package?

Sarah Ruffcorn: Never crossed our minds, of all the meetings that we had, that was never one that we prepared for. We were definitely with everybody else in that boat.

Troy Mix: You were prime to be remote to some degree, with those disaster preparedness plans in place. But what were the things that pandemic brought that you weren't prepared for when it came time to going remote?

Sarah Ruffcorn: A few things. One is typically with a storm or hurricane, you usually have a couple of days of prep. We felt like with this event, it was very much overnight. It went from, "okay, the numbers are going up" to the next day saying, "oh, my goodness, schools are shutting down." It was just incredibly fast for us to very quickly flip into gear and put together a rollout plan for everyone to go remote. To be able to get set up at home, our phone systems, of course, as you can imagine, are very important to us in our line of business. It's basically phones and computers, to do our job. In order to do that, we put together a rollout plan in which we were going to have everybody home within two weeks, that ended up turning into four days, as we rolled people out.

Some of the lessons that I think that we learned through that was just ensuring that we always have enough equipment on hand, that we've got enough monitors, for instance, on hand, those kinds of things. It was very much how can we kind of pick up our current workstations and move it and have

everything work correctly. Phone system routings, our internet—does everybody even have internet at home? That was like a whole thing. Do we need to get some of the Verizon sticks or other...systems for people to connect to the internet? There were some things that we learned through that, for future events of just keeping record of those types of things so we know how to [more quickly] plan for those things.

But it was very fast for the most part.. In fact, I was on a call earlier today with several of our team members just doing what we call a coffee chat. It's just kind of saying, okay, how things are going for you? This is a group of six people across the company across different States. Most of them were all remote except for one was in one of our Texas offices. It was just so interesting to get their perspective on how things have been going. One of them actually commented just on that. They're like "the rollout plan was so smooth. I don't think anyone, from a carrier to a shipper, would have ever known whether we were in the office at home because of how smoothly that was able to go." I was like, man, that is really great to hear because from our side, we saw things going well from a reporting and systems perspective, but they are listening to our shippers and our carriers all the time. For them to say that was just really meaningful, that we had things lined up correctly to do that well.

Reinventing Collaboration for Remote Work ([8:18 Start Listening Here](#))

Troy Mix: I want to go off the coffee chat that you mentioned and reflect back. You were somewhat well-prepared because you had people working remotely and telecommuting, but you also said those were people that tended to be in low collaboration jobs. Now you've got this incredible adjustment happening, as you said "high collaboration activity," to figure out how [you are] going to be the best partner [you] can be to [y]our carriers. How have you been working on maintaining collaboration for people that are newly remote or remote more often now? When you might've gotten in front of a whiteboard or whatever your preferred method is before, what does that look like now?

Sarah Ruffcorn: Yeah, that's a great question. That's something I feel like we're still figuring out. I don't know that we have all the right answers there. We're just trying a bunch of things. Microsoft Teams has been—we hardly used it before, especially in our executive team. Like we hardly used Teams. I mean, of course that became our instant best friend, as far as calling and video messaging. We learned that tool really quickly and how to use it effectively. One of the things--it was funny actually. The first couple of weeks, it's like, you still call everybody on your phone, like you used to do. Then a couple of weeks later, and all of a sudden people start video calling you. You're like, "oh my goodness, I've gotta be on a video and I don't know that I'm prepared for that today." I think a lot of people went through that adjustment, too.

Now what we're doing is we're saying, "Okay, how can we take the best of both worlds?" So we're trying to create some really intentional interaction across the network. Before we would go to our different regional service centers to visit and do a quarterly update and town hall to show where

we're at on our initiatives for the year. Then, also get into small groups and get feedback and find out what's happening at the local level.

Well, now we haven't traveled to the regional service centers. And we would do regular coffee chats or, swinging by people's desks here in Delaware, or meeting in the hallway and just having a casual conversation. How can we reinvent how we interact? One of the things that we've decided to do a couple of times a week is getting together these very random groups of people across our company and just asking them, "how is it going in your world? And, Oh, by the way, have you met so-and-so that works out of our Kansas city office and have you met so-and-so out of Texas?"

So, it's been super interesting for people to interact in this really intentional way. It's not a meeting, it's all about feedback and it's all about what's going on in your world. It's collaborating across the network on how things are going and allowing even myself to get feedback on what's happening at that local level, but doing that across the network in a different way than we were doing before. I really like it, and I think the team really likes it. I've gotten very good feedback on that. We'll continue to do things like that. We also did a scavenger hunt for just some team interaction because we like to do different, fun events for people to get to know each other. So we've done things like scavenger hunts. We've done ways where people can still support our troops and send boxes overseas. Where people can at least be a part of something while remote, can still feel like they're part of something bigger than themselves, even though they're [working] out of their home. Creating these intentional collaboration moments, as best as we possibly can. And like I said, we're trying things.

Troy Mix: Yeah, I know on my end, we used to have a lot of meetings in the hallway that weren't planned, and the hallways were always busy and loud. It's been a struggle to not just add additional meetings to coordinate intentionally, but actually have these kinds of meetings where we're going to get together, we don't really know why, but we need to connect and figure out what's going on in everybody's world. And that has been a struggle. I'm glad to hear you're experimenting and learning what works on your end. You mentioned those few people who have been working remote, what does it look like now? What's the rough percentage of who's mostly remote or all remote?

Sarah Ruffcorn: Yeah. All of our support teams for the most part are all remote still. There are some people who are coming into the office, but very few. I would say probably 90 percent of our technology, HR, and admin—if we take that group and put them together, there's probably about 90 percent or so remote still. And then we've spaced out. Using the space that we have, the sales and operational teams are coming into the office. Depending on location, that looks different. We've had...spikes happen in certain states. We've had to send them back out remote again for a couple of weeks, and then we'll reevaluate. And so, that's how we're managing it. We have another office that's doing a rotation where they've got half of the people in the office one week, half the people in the office... the next week. We have another office who's doing three days and two days with everyone on the team. So, trying to figure out what's best...at that local level, but for the most part, our sales and operational teams are highly collaborative groups that really depend on each other. A lot of them have come back into the office. Here in Delaware, in the corporate office, we're running at about, I'd

say 50% or so into the office on some kind of schedule throughout a week. Some days of course it's lower. Other days it's higher, but probably right around 50%.

Recruiting and Developing a Remote Team ([14:20 Start Listening Here](#))

Troy Mix: Are you still onboarding people or have you been onboarding people these last eight weeks?

Sarah Ruffcorn: We have been still onboarding people. Yes.

Troy Mix: What kind of special attention has that taken? What does that look like?

Sarah Ruffcorn: A lot of video. We've had to get really good. I was talking to our director of education yesterday and she's like, "one thing that this has done has made me much better at virtual learning." I think just like our teachers are learning how to do that on the fly. We have regional service centers, so again, virtual learning is not a new concept to us, but to the level that we're doing it now is much different than we were doing that before. We've had to take things such as our onboarding and our orientation and transition that to being all online while still mixing in, that shadow time. But sometimes that's had to happen via Teams.. So that's been a really interesting challenge. We rolled out a completely new computer component in our operating system...and before, we would have thought that would have been impossible to do. You would have absolutely said everybody has to be onsite, but now we are able to do that all virtually. It just kind of increased the level of what we can do and what we feel like is effective has changed.

Troy Mix: How much of that did you have to kind of figure out for yourselves? Like use your ingenuity on staff versus find other examples of organizations that [are] doing it well and say, "we can make that happen, too?" What did that look like?

Sarah Ruffcorn: Yeah. I mean, we definitely read a lot of articles on what people are doing. How are people handling this? What can we do? So that's been good and there's been a lot published around that topic, for sure. Honestly, I just go back to us trying things, Let's try it! Let's try one pilot group on this new technology system platform and let's see how that goes, and then let's measure and navigate from there. A lot of it has just been, "you know what? Let's try it. Let's see what happens." And, and that feels sometimes when you can break it down into that...it doesn't have to be virtual forever, but let's just try it virtual for now. Let's see how it goes. It's much easier for people to swallow and people have been stepping up to say, "we're going to tweak the way that we're doing this or that, because I think that will be better." And so everybody's kind of bought in to just trying to be successful and make it work. When you've got a team that's willing to just do whatever it takes to make it work, those things tend to work well. If everybody's willing to learn and go along for the ride, and feel their way through things because you just don't really know what's going to happen, that's a pretty cool place to be. People get really creative with how to solve problems.

Troy Mix: On that virtual forever versus virtual for now piece, I guess I'll ask you to speculate on how permanent a part of Trinity's future is this remote work experiment and using virtual tools and the ways you're using them now?

Sarah Ruffcorn: Yeah. That's been a lot of discussion that we've been having, for sure. I will say that as we look at, again, each of the roles and the responsibilities and how effectively the work is or isn't getting done, I think that will determine a lot of those things. I will say that, the technology teams and the admin teams specifically—when you're in that individual contributor role and you're doing a really great job at making those things happen, then, I think some of those jobs can be remote. We've hired a couple of admin positions specifically to say, “you can be based anywhere.” We just want the best claims rep that we can possibly find and take the borders off. That has been incredibly successful for us. We've hired a couple of positions that we essentially set out to say, this will be permanently remote.

Ensuring Work-Life Balance ([18:36 Start Listening Here](#))

Troy Mix: Since I have one of my sons sitting on the floor next to me as I'm talking to you, I'll ask, how have you been dealing with work-life balance for people? What kind of programs have you put in place or what discussions are people having? What's that look like at Trinity?

Sarah Ruffcorn: Yeah, we've had to be very flexible as everybody has, and to really make sure that people are taking care of the things that they need to take care of, personally, as well as professionally. But, I will say that I think it's super important for people to be as effective as possible that they have the flexibility to do what they need to do. So, as long as the results are happening and the goals are being met...some of these positions it doesn't matter if you're doing it at 6:00 AM or 6:00 PM or 10 o'clock at night, it doesn't matter. So, depending on the role of course. But that's been, I think, incredibly helpful. I've heard from several of our team members, just how thankful they are to be able to work in that flexible kind of way, because, I think if we took a really rigid approach on that, I don't think that would go well at all.

I wouldn't want that, and I wouldn't want my team to have to do that. I think it's—and we've said this several times here at Trinity—let's make sure that people are in the best spot to be as successful as possible, whatever that looks like. Whether that's in the office, whether that's at home, whether that's a combination of the two, let's let every person really put themselves in the best, most successful position.

Troy Mix: So, you...probably already had a very results-oriented culture, I would imagine, or you had clear measures of what success was? It wasn't that you suddenly had to define it and say, we're going to track your every move?

Sarah Ruffcorn: The reporting hasn't changed from whether we were in the office or out of the office. The transparency of how individuals are doing, individually or as a team or as a company.

We've definitely increased our communications significantly from a company perspective because we were giving those updates every month in the new environment where everyone was suddenly shifted into the unknown. It was really important for us to communicate clearly and often. So, we started doing weekly videos every week of how we are doing as a company, where we're tracking [on our goals] for the month, where our volumes stand—we really stepped up our game significantly on the communication front.

Leading through Uncertainty ([21:23 Start Listening Here](#))

Troy Mix: Looking kind of at your game as a leader at Trinity, where were you really stressed as a leader throughout this? And, what kind of lessons are you learning about how you're going to approach your job when we hopefully get to that magical new normal?

Sarah Ruffcorn: Yeah, I mean, I think some of the biggest stressors were you just didn't know what was going to happen next, Navigating the unknown, but at the same time forging forward. That was, if I have to go back and say, “oh my goodness, what were the most stressful moments through the last few months as a leader?,” it's definitely that. Just all the things that go along with that, right. I mean, there were team members that I know were really worried because they had family members being laid off from their jobs and they had these things happening personally to them. Then coming to our team and saying, okay, team, here's where we're at, here's where we're trending. We've got to really continue to service our carriers and our shippers as best as we possibly can through this time. And, and thank goodness we were able to do that really well.

I would say the most stressful moments were just those times. I don't know, we don't know what's going to come next and I think that's been...I don't know if I would say the new normal, but I think the new normal is just expecting change and being able to get a lot of feedback from your team on what's happening at the ground level, and how can we adjust. And also continuing to stay close to the business and with our shippers and our carriers. I think if I've learned anything through this time, it's that. And the carriers have had a really rough time, through this, especially at the beginning of this. There were a lot of phone calls made [to] our key carrier relationships to say, just thank you for keeping things moving, because we couldn't do it without them.

Showing that appreciation, I think through these times, just shines the light that we need to be doing that all the time, not just in really tough times, right? So there were definitely some key takeaways through this that said, let's not stop doing this. Let's keep doing this. We need to show appreciation more. That's been a really cool shift, I think in our strategic direction, just to up our game on that front. I think we were definitely doing it, but I think we can continue to improve and be better at that.

Troy Mix: Well, I really appreciate you taking time today, Sarah, and talking us through the remote work experiment at Trinity and what the future might hold.

Sarah Ruffcorn: Absolutely. Thank you so much, Troy. It's been great talking with you. Have a great one.

About Trinity Logistics and Sarah Ruffcorn

Headquartered in Seaford, Delaware, with seven regional service center locations throughout the country, [Trinity Logistics](#) is a [Burriss Logistics Company](#) that offers people-centric freight solutions. As President, Sarah Ruffcorn leads all aspects of Trinity Logistics. A big believer in servant leadership, Sarah coaches and mentors other leaders to assist in their growth and success. She was awarded the 2015 Delaware Business Times Best 40 under 40 award for being one of the region's "best & brightest young professionals" and nominated as a top 5 finalist for the 2019 "Distinguished Woman in Logistics" award. Under Sarah's leadership, Trinity Logistics is recognized as a top 20 freight brokerage on *Transport Topics'* Top 100 Freight Brokerage List, a top third-party logistics (3PL) and cold storage provider by *Food Logistics*, and a Certified Great Place to Work®.

About First State Insights

[First State Insights](#) is a podcast presented by the University of Delaware's Institute for Public Administration (IPA). Tune in for information, perspectives, and analysis—"IPA"—on public policy, management, and community and economic development in Delaware. Visit [IPA's SoundCloud](#) page to see a full list of episodes, or search for "First State Insights" to listen wherever you get your podcasts.

This episode is presented as part of the [Future of Remote Work series](#). This series of articles and interviews seeks to shed light on remote work trends; explore implications for businesses, communities, and policymakers; and spur conversations aimed at making this emerging reality work well for Delaware. Listen to all episodes in the series on the [Future of Remote Work playlist on SoundCloud](#), and consult the IPA website for [remote work news and articles](#).