

# LEARNING FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF THE LAST 18 MONTHS

**Brian Rockey, Director, Nebraska Lottery**

**PGRI INTRODUCTION:** Brian Rockey was appointed director on July 1, 2016. But he served in a wide variety of lottery industry positions in the years prior, including Marketing Manager with the Lottery, from startup in 1993 through 2011. He then worked for IGT, the primary contractor for the Nebraska Lottery before returning to the Nebraska Lottery and Charitable Gaming Division as its Director.

Sales in FY2021 increased by double-digits over FY2020. Let's talk about how the adversity of the last 18 months can be a catalyst for positive change and ongoing success for the benefit of good causes.

**Paul Jason: Do employers need to apply new tools to effectively manage remote workers – like software to measure performance and productivity?**

**Brian Rockey:** Of course, project management software that has been around for years and is always being improved upon is intended to serve much of that purpose. But, to your question, I think everyone is exploring ways to enhance the process of managing remote work as the work-style of the future will almost certainly include a larger component of remote work. The Nebraska Lottery is a division of the Department of Revenue which has been a proving-ground for managing remote work in Nebraska's state government. You'll recall that it happened almost overnight that everyone stopped coming to work. The first week of March of last year, everyone was in the office, in the field, or at PGRI's Miami conference, and it was business as usual. By the end of the second week of March, everyone was in "shelter-at-home" mode. Quite the dramatic change that threatened to turn everything

upside down. But immediately we began to apply project management metrics more rigorously than ever to clarify time spans, intermediate benchmarks, and MBO (management-by-objectives) markers. We now have a wealth of experience and data to inform the next steps towards professionalizing the management of remote work.

At the peak of the response to the pandemic, most departments including the Lottery, were at about 70% of staff working remotely, out-of-the-office. The Tax Commissioner's goal was that the departments get to about 50/50 in the office and out-of-the-office. Some state government agency offices, including the Lottery, are more fully reconstituted, with a larger percentage having returned to working in the office. Given fewer in-office workers, we have been able to effect a more socially-distanced work environment. And we developed what some call "hoteling" areas that have work-stations set up to serve multiple workers who spend some but not all their time in the office. And we have large counter-spaces with docking stations

for anyone to set up quickly and easily.

**Many people think that video-conferencing is no replacement for in-person meetings.**

**B. Rockey:** Of course, video-conferencing will never completely replace in-person meetings. Nobody wants that to happen. And nobody expects that it will ever happen. But perhaps more interesting than lamenting the constraints to travel and in-person meetings is to look at how resourceful everyone has become in our efforts to use the tools available to us to get the job done. Video-conferencing has proven to be a remarkably effective tool to enable personal, albeit remote, interaction and collaboration. So much so that in my opinion it will continue to be used as much going forward as it has been over the last 18 months.

I don't think we would have discovered the incredible utility of video-conferencing if the pandemic had not thrust us into an immersion learning process. Now that we have climbed that steep learning curve, we



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**“The experience of the last 18 months has put a premium on pooling our resources from all quarters, including the vendor, and galvanizing the whole team to focus on long-term and strategic planning.”**

can look back and see how valuable video-conferencing has been. And I think it will continue to be a relevant tool and enhance the whole process of managing the business. I would submit that as our proficiency with video conferencing increased, so have our communication and presentation skills. Video meetings have not only become more and more productive, I think we will continue to discover more ways to further improve the utility and effectiveness of this medium. I am finding, for instance, that team members are preparing more for video-meetings than they were for in-person meetings. Perhaps it is because they are concerned that a talking head on a video screen may not be persuasive without being augmented by the best presentation. So, if the ideas they want to convey are important and they want to engage buy-in from the rest of the team, people are more likely to prepare slides and maybe even distribute a pre-meeting brief to help us come to consensus and decide on action-plans. We know it can be a little harder to lock down agreement and consensus in a video-meeting than in an in-person meeting, so we try harder to overcome the obstacles and do more to make sure we come away with action-plans and not just more talk.

I suppose I would compare it to the evolution of e-mail. There were people who lamented the transition from telephone calls and in-person meetings over to an increased reliance on e-mail. Now we realize that not only is e-mail a very efficient way to advance a dialogue, a collateral and perhaps unanticipated benefit of e-mail is that it forced us to clarify our thinking. Putting my ideas in writing causes me to think more clearly about what it is I want to accomplish, communicate more concisely, and get to the “ask” or at least get to the point more quickly.

Email did not replace phone calls or in-person meetings. But it sure did reduce the volume of phone calls and has

had a profound impact on the way we communicate and interact with each other. Let’s focus on the positive impact of video-conferencing and how we might elevate its utility and effectiveness going forward.

**Do you have an example of how video-conferencing has enhanced the execution of a project?**

**B. Rocky:** Our team meets every Tuesday with our vendor partner IGT. We review the activities and metrics relating to sales, distribution, project benchmarks, cost-management, etc. Before the pandemic, this meeting was a combination of in-person – our team would convene in the conference room, and those not there in-person would call-in. For the past 18 months, attendance has been almost 100% video-conferencing which enables everyone to participate in equal manner. And the video-conferencing platform enables everyone to share data and slides that illustrate the points much better than verbally on a teleconference. In the pre-pandemic in-person days, information was shared informally and sometimes not presented effectively in the meeting. Video-conferencing has led to a professionalizing of our communication skills.

How often do we hear people in meetings say “I’ll follow-up and send you that information”? In video-conferencing, everyone can and should be ready to share all relevant info instantly. Video-conferencing has forced us to come more prepared and work harder to turn the discussion into action-plans. And video-meetings are easier for everyone to attend. Getting feedback from more of the team members in real-time further removes obstacles to decisions and action-plans. We find we can save times

as well. Pre-pandemic meetings would typically run over an hour and often even 90 minutes. Now we typically finish in less than an hour. I feel we are actually accomplishing more in less time, end up with better project management documentation which carries forward to future meetings and to our semi-annual and annual strategic planning meetings.

**You have a diversity of experience, working in the commercial sector with IGT and now in the government sector as director of the Lottery. How do you think your tenure as marketing director for the Nebraska Lottery and your service on the vendor side with IGT informs your perspective and prepared you for leading the Lottery?**

**B. Rocky:** I’ve been very fortunate to have been associated with the lottery in one way or another since it started. The position of lottery marketing director is part of a wide variety of business functions, so it gave me a broad perspective. And then having the opportunity to go to IGT for five years helped me learn to assess and balance both sides of the ledger sheet.

The vendor side helps you get very clear on the bottom-line ROI side of any investment or expenditure. On the lottery side, we learn that short-term ROI is one of many factors and some games or promotions have public relations value that is not recognized by sales metrics. Some serve a long-term purpose of broadening the player-base by appealing to next-generation players. Serving in both sectors taught me how to dissect the ebb and flow of the market-place, to apply financial metrics and ratios to better understand the trajectories of revenues and profit, and how to analyze the logistical issues associated with certain products and supply chains. Perhaps even more importantly, the experience on the commercial side has helped me structure our group discussions and help our team identify and articulate our goals, objectives, strategies, and our tactics to get there.

I view it as my job to encourage everyone to think outside the box as they serve the

**“The guiding principle, though, isn’t adherence to form and process – it’s about applying a metric-driven analytical process to improve outcomes and add value for the customer.”**