

Simplifying Telework for Government Employees

As employees dig in for long-term telework, government agencies are trying to streamline remote working technologies and practices.

FEATURED EXPERTS:



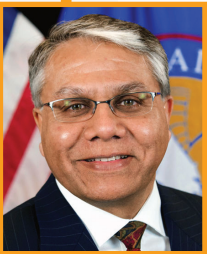
■ Ann Kim

Deputy Chief Information Officer, Dept. of Energy



■ Vaughn Noga

Chief Information Officer, Environmental Protection Agency



■ Sanjay Gupta

Chief Technology Officer, Small Business Admin.



■ Brandon Shopp

Vice President of Product, Network Management, SolarWinds

This year has been an extremely challenging one for federal employees. Instead of commuting to their normal office spaces, they must now clean up their spare rooms and kitchen tables to create home offices and makeshift workspaces. Before COVID-19 forced many agencies to adapt a telework-heavy framework, only 22% of employees telecommuted regularly. That number has now surpassed 90%, and many employees who never thought about teleworking before have been forced into it daily.

Now that agencies have successfully gotten their employees teleworking, the focus is on making the process more streamlined. This will reduce stress, eliminate security vulnerabilities, and allow employees to focus on their core missions, not problems with the telework environment. Government and technology experts believe they should concentrate on four key areas to improve remote working operations.

MODERNIZE HARDWARE AND SOFTWARE TO INCREASE EFFICIENCY AND STREAMLINE PROGRAMS

This may seem a little basic in the grand scheme of making telecommuting easier for the average worker, but it makes a big difference. Obsolete laptops, unstable legacy systems, and bandwidth-hoarding programs represent some of the most common problems teleworkers will deal with. Investing in required upgrades will result in fewer crashes and slowdowns and provides more time to focus on completing agency objectives. The Department of Education was aware of this and started modernizing before the pandemic even started.

"Prior to the pandemic, we didn't always have the technology we needed to support our users," said Ann Kim, Deputy Chief Information Officer at the Department of Education. "Last year, as part of our modernization plan, we completely modernized. We upgraded our laptops, security, boot up times, office productivity tools, and made additional enhancements."

Having an upgraded infrastructure put the Department of Education in a good position to provide support for its new teleworking needs. This demonstrates how proactive planning is often one of the best strategies to overcoming and preventing future problems.

BUILDING TELEWORK SUPPORT THROUGH SMART INVESTMENTS

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a lot of technological issues for government agencies that didn't anticipate the sudden influx of remote workers. This pandemic has underscored the need to ensure telework infrastructure and support is proactively upgraded as a matter of continuity planning. Additionally, COVID-19 has shown why smart technology investing is important to building good foundations for a resilient workforce.

"Even prior to COVID, we had a fairly robust teleworking infrastructure," said Vaughn Noga, Chief Information Officer for the Environmental Protection Agency. "I would say during COVID, in the first two weeks, we probably experienced the same thing other folks did. It's the sheer magnitude. So, with the support of our partners, AT&T and other folks, we were able to scale up quickly. It was more of a licensing thing for us, and we got folks productive very quickly."

In addition to the infrastructure, having good software in place helps and is not as difficult for agencies to install compared with hardware upgrades. For example, at EPA, Noga said communication tools like Skype and Microsoft Teams have helped to keep workers in touch with one another as telecommuting becomes normalized.

INVEST IN CLOUD TECHNOLOGY TO IMPROVE FLEXIBILITY

Situations involving frequent telework are fluid and require dynamic systems to handle an employee working in the office one day and at home the next. Onboarding new employees has also been an issue due to restrictions on gatherings and closures of many offices. By investing in cloud-based software and systems, agencies can train new employees without the need for an in-person group meeting and can scale to meet any demand.

"We've taken many, many different actions. Some were in place before the pandemic. For example, moving to a cloud-based infrastructure for secure connectivity," said Sanjay Gupta, Chief Technology Officer for the Small Business Association. "And then we looked for new ways to support the surge in demand. From an SBA standpoint, everybody is able to telework."

LOOKING PAST VPN FOR TELEWORKING NEEDS

Most government agencies are highly invested in VPN for teleworking purposes. While VPN does well with regular telework for smaller groups, it's not easy to manage when thousands of employees need to access it at the same time. In the early days of the pandemic response, employees suffered constant crashes.

While some problems can be solved by increasing bandwidth and adding VPN licenses, a better move various agencies are considering is evolving past VPN, or at least doing things like improving security to make it a better teleworking platform.

In government, "VPN is there, and will continue to be there," said Brandon Shopp, vice president of product, network management for SolarWinds. "But now with the pandemic, you have a lot more people working from home, so you need to make sure you add the right monitoring technology to watch all those VPN gateways."

And Shopp says simplifying teleworking can also include helping home-based users directly. For example, not every employee will have a robust enough internal internet or good enough equipment to run agency programs from their home. Monitoring the user experience is important and can be fixed with things like a faster notebook computer or a better Wi-Fi network. Because sometimes, streamlining teleworking means helping the end users as much as beefing up internal agency networks.



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