

Continuity After COVID-19: Rising to the Challenge of Remote Work

RESEARCH BRIEF



Executive Summary

There was a time when telework was not mission-essential to many agencies. In fact, it was often seen as a perk or a privilege reserved for high performers.

Now, during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led governments to issue shelter-in-place orders, states of emergency, school closures and social distancing protocols, telework has become the only way for many agencies to continue essential operations safely and effectively.

"This is going to change the culture of how government works," said Steve Nguyen, Vice President of Public Sector at Citrix, a digital workspace provider.

Telework was once an optional feature that government organizations added to increase employee satisfaction or widen the talent pool. But now, the pandemic has forced agencies to think differently. Many have had no choice but to shift to telework. And all, if not most of, the employees at these agencies will have to work remotely for an indeterminate amount of time. This is, plainly, not the average telework situation.

"Pandemics are unique in that they primarily affect an organization's workforce as opposed to its physical infrastructure," stated the National Association of State Chief Information Officers' (NASCIO) [March COVID-19 guidance](#). **In other words, that means the measures stood up for continuity of operations (COOP) must primarily address the ways the workforce is affected.** Workforce continuity is more critical than before.

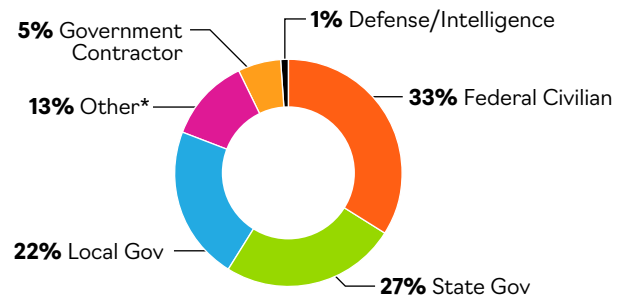
COOP is the effort to ensure that essential government operations continue in the event of an emergency. Workforce continuity aids COOP by centering the people who run the operations and services as one of the most important elements to continue essential functions. It is a strategy for a dispersed and distributed workforce to continue working during a crisis.

But how prepared was the workforce to do so? How ready were they to operate in a telework-as-COOP scenario?

To better understand this unique situation, GovLoop partnered with Citrix to survey over 800 government employees in March 2020. We answered questions about what kinds of measures agencies had in place, what cultural challenges the workforce anticipated and what tools employees had to work in this new normal.

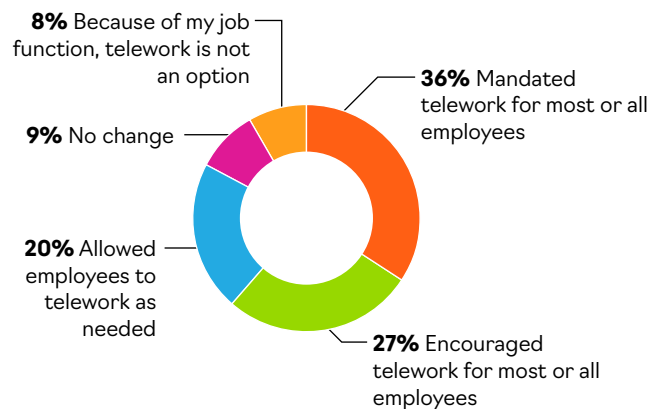
We surveyed 823 respondents in March 2020. Below is a starting point to get to know the community that responded.

I work for...

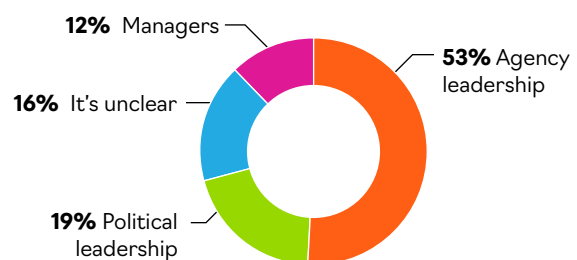


*Some examples of "Other" are: nonprofit employee, public school teacher, health care, higher education

How has your agency implemented telework to respond to concerns about spreading the virus?



Who is driving decisions about remote work in your agency?



COOP Readiness: Are We Prepared?

Our survey found varying levels of continuity preparedness across different government organizations. Partly, the level of readiness depended on the level of government.

When asked if their agencies had tested remote work policies within the last two years, 38% of overall respondents said yes and 35% said no (See Figure 1). Responses largely depended on whether employees worked for federal, state or local agencies.

Federal civilian agencies, for instance, were the most prepared when it came to testing and documentation. Nearly half of federal respondents attested that their organizations had performed testing in recent years (See Figure 2). They were also the most likely to have defined and documented processes for remote work in the event that the majority of the workforce had to work virtually (See Figure 4).

Local municipalities, on the other hand, were the least likely to have these measures in place.

Over half of employees working in local government, or 53%, said their organizations had not tested remote work policies recently, versus 35% of state employees and 23% of federal employees (See Figure 2).

Local government employees were also the least likely to have any kind of documented processes in the event that the majority of their teams had to work remotely (See Figure 4).

Within the last two years, has your agency tested its remote work policies and procedures?

FIGURE 1

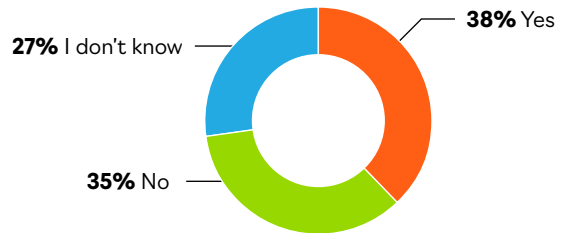
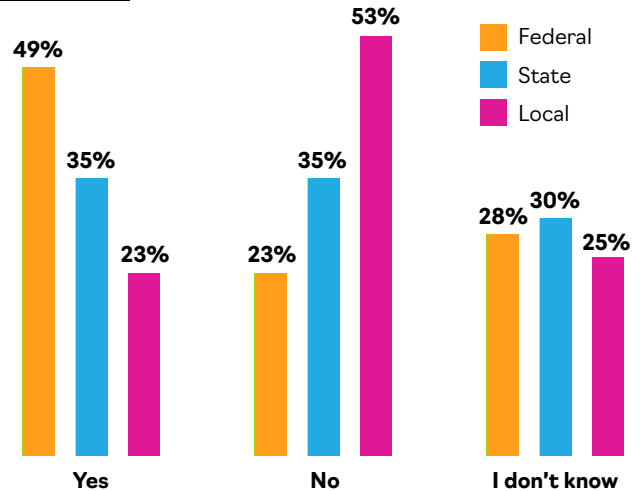


FIGURE 2



In the event that the majority of people are required to work remotely, does your agency have clearly defined and documented processes to help teams collaborate effectively?

FIGURE 3

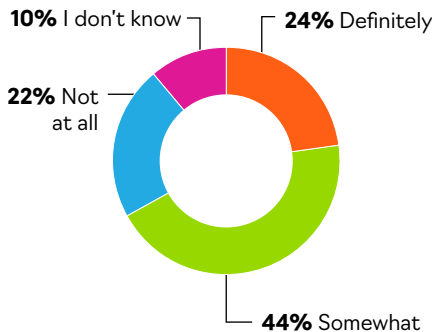
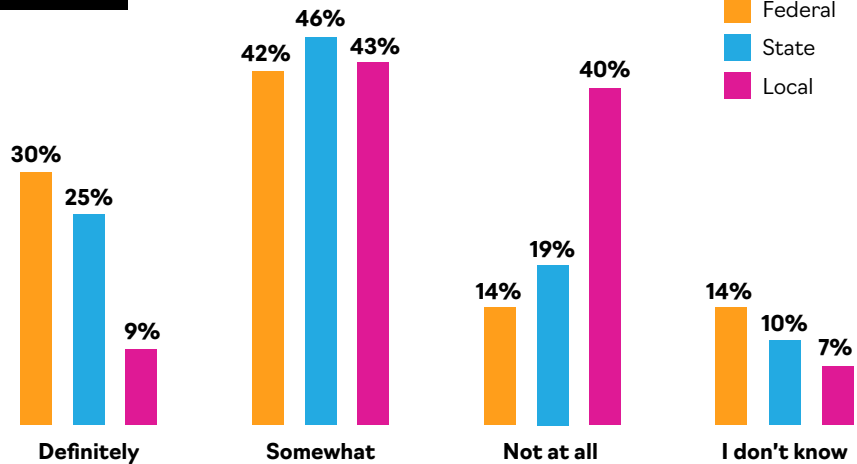


FIGURE 4



Measures that ameliorate workforce disruptions in a pandemic – such as testing and documenting processes – can often be overlooked amid other priorities that government organizations with limited time and budgets juggle, Nguyen said. Under normal circumstances, it can feel less essential to test and document procedures to support extreme situations. These risk-based measures, however, make the difference the moment a crisis hits.

Namely, the key benefit of having tested, documented procedures, such as ensuring IT can support telework during COOP, or clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of personnel, is smoother workforce continuity.

Imagine this: You sit down at your kitchen table with everything you need to do your work – your laptop, your Wi-Fi and secure access to the files you need. But you don't know exactly how to go about working. What is the same and what is different about the processes in the office versus at home? What about during a pandemic? Is that information available to you?

For employees already dealing with the changes in their day-to-day lives, unclarity at work can be even more overwhelming.

"Having these measures in place is not about just saying, 'I am prepared, and the agency is prepared' – but it is for the mental health of the employees to know exactly what to do when this happens," Nguyen said.

For government organizations that have not yet tested or documented all-telework strategies, all is not lost. Leaders can focus on a short-term plan immediately, while putting a long-term COOP telework plan in place, Nguyen said.



In the short term, leaders should tackle two things: tools and management.

First, make sure employees have the tools they need to telework effectively. Remember that kitchen table scenario? You can't properly assess how to get your work done if first, you don't have the tools to do your job. Necessary tools can include connectivity, devices, collaboration software – anything the employee needs to perform essential functions and collaborate.

Second, re-strategize how leaders manage and motivate the workforce remotely. It's back to Management 101, Nguyen said. The pandemic puts the whole workforce in a telework situation that no one has experienced before.

"There are a lot of emotional needs going on during this time period," Nguyen said. "You have to keep your employees engaged, but you also need to make sure that they're physically healthy as well as mentally healthy."

The more agencies can minimize the risks they can control, the more relieved employees will feel in an already stressful situation.

"Having these measures in place is not about just saying, 'I am prepared, and the agency is prepared' – but it is for the mental health of the employees to know exactly what to do when this happens."

- Steve Nguyen, Vice President of Public Sector at Citrix

COOP Cooperation: How Is the Culture?

Here is the good news: We found that the majority of respondents felt confident in their managers' and coworkers' ability to work effectively in a virtual environment (See Figures 5 and 6).

"Good performers are good, regardless of where they are," said one survey respondent.

Changes in environment certainly bring adjustments to how we work. But more and more, work has become less of a place and more of a thing we do. The federal digital services agency 18F, for example, has operated with a distributed workforce and a "remote-first" mindset for several years.

A productive work culture that leads to good performance is less about being in a physical space than trusting your coworkers. Although the experience of seeing people face to face is irreplaceable, it is not the only way – nor the best way – to work now, especially with access to digital collaboration tools.

"I believe productivity [in telework] is at least equal to and more likely greater than a non-telework environment, with a significant boost in employee morale. And in five years, I've never heard of a work problem resulting from a person not being physically in the office," one respondent said.

At the same time, the changes we are experiencing today in our work environment are not merely adjusting from the office to home. We are adjusting to all the changes that the pandemic is causing in our day-to-day lives. Just one of those changes is the environment in which we work.

During this new normal, the most common cultural challenges that employees are concerned about are performance and productivity, and the loss of face-to-face interactions (See Figure 7).

With the shift to telework, there are a number of unpredictable variables that enter our lives. They can include having children at home due to school closures, or never having worked remotely before.

FIGURE 5

Are you confident that your supervisor can manage effectively in a virtual team environment?

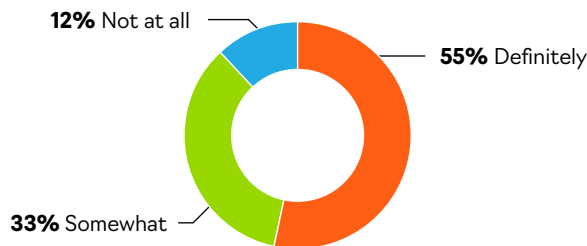


FIGURE 6

Are you confident that your coworkers can work effectively in a virtual team environment?

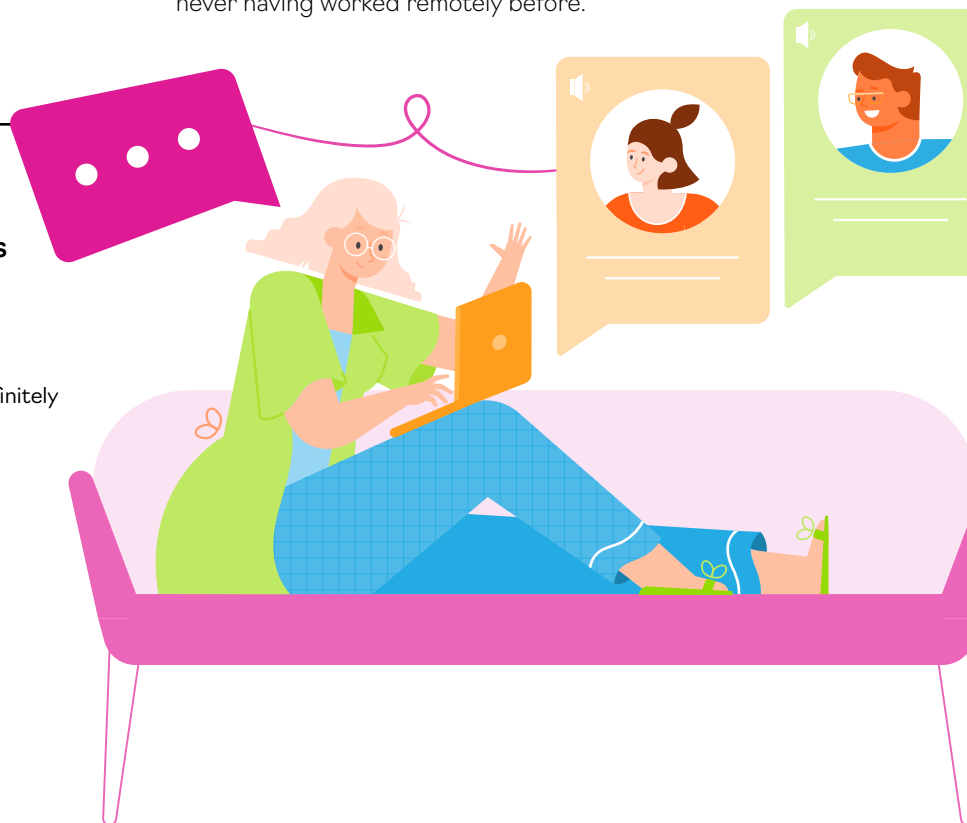
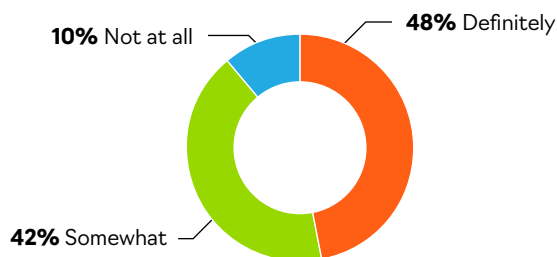
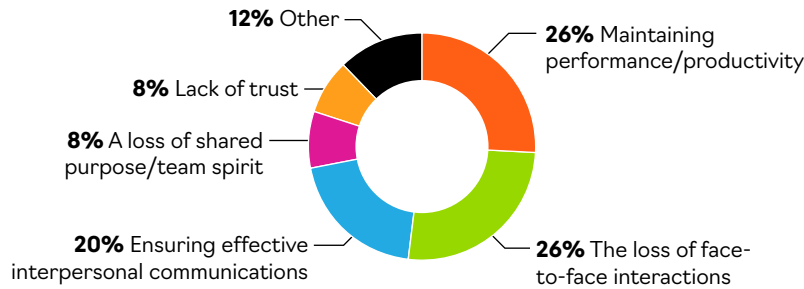


FIGURE 7

What do you see as the biggest cultural challenge to working effectively in a team environment?



“If you demonstrate care for your employee’s experience ... they’ll reward you with the innovation and discretionary effort to find solutions to seemingly impossible problems and carry your organization through this time.”

- Chris Voce, Customer Engagement Strategist, Citrix

“The biggest issue seen so far is not everyone on the team is confident enough in their skills to work all [applications], or they have not done video conferences online. **This is a whole new experience for so many,**” one respondent said.

Basic digital skills are even more important now for employees who are forced to work remotely. Ensuring that everyone knows how to use collaboration tools such as video conferencing is a simple and essential step for smoother workforce continuity.

It also makes a difference for those concerned about the loss of face-to-face interactions. Though we may not be able to see our colleagues’ faces in person, seeing them virtually through video conferencing can help us feel more connected and more engaged.

Additionally, more important than solutions for top-notch levels of productivity is setting realistic expectations.

“The stress levels on employees is clearly going to impact service delivery,” another respondent said. “The economic impact is detrimental to all, but mostly the ones with less or limited resources.”

During this crisis, it is impossible to expect the same levels of productivity for those with children or roommates at home, or those without reliable internet access, for example. As public servants, government employees want to be as productive as possible to serve the needs of their stakeholders. But productivity at the cost of their health is ultimately detrimental to the overall productivity and morale of an organization.

Chris Voce, Customer Engagement Strategist at Citrix, said it best in a [blog post](#):

“At the business level, productivity is the sum of individuals’ progress. If you demonstrate care for your employee’s experience – their safety, progress and wellbeing – they’ll reward you with the innovation and discretionary effort to find solutions to seemingly impossible problems and carry your organization through this time.”

The workforce is the most valuable resource to government operations and COOP, especially during unprecedented times. The success of continuity ultimately lies in the people who make COOP possible. So the health of the people is paramount.



Verbatims

The survey included several questions with open-ended answers. And respondents had a lot to say. Here is a sampling of what they shared about telework during COVID-19, verbatim.

(Note: These responses were submitted in March 2020.)

"These "telework flexibilities" do not solve the biggest problem facing federal employees who are parents (especially single parents). For the hours we are taking care of our young children whose schools are closed, we should be able to use admin leave, rather than burning through our Annual Leave or doing leave without pay."

"For 10 years, I've worked from home full-time for a government contractor. My supervisor and many colleagues also work from home full- or part-time. We use Zoom for team meetings. The work culture promotes teamwork, and we can count on each other to pitch in and help if someone gets overloaded."

"I'm hoping the one positive to come out of this emergency will be a sea of change in how telework is viewed, from thinly veiled suspicion that employees are just using it to slack off and get paid for sitting at home, to valuing it as another important tool in our arsenal."

"Need more resources and support from management on preventing mental health issues due to social isolations as a result of teleworking, especially if this goes on for a prolonged period."

"We can do this."

"The biggest issue is the resistance to change... There is so much available if we could only use and embrace them..."

"I find myself to be much more productive teleworking remotely than in an open office/cubicle environment. I can focus for once... and don't have to spend time moving from conference room to conference room to have a phone call."

"The major resource that's needed is patience. We've gone to almost everyone on telework, and the infrastructure has crashed, but over the past two days they've deployed more resources and worked with our contracted provider and remote access is working much better again. There may be a cascade of these at other sites to get to a fully stable environment, just give your IT folks time to work through it."

"Supervisors should be empowered to make decisions for their direct reports."

"Many jobs in our organization simply can't be done remotely, because they involve providing services directly to residents, some of which can't be done online."

"We do have a few staff who do not have internet access at home, and some who have never teleworked. Staff and managers have to be flexible. We were pleasantly surprised by how adaptable some staff were (who have never teleworked, not tech savvy) when forced to work remotely!"

"Keep on keeping on."

COOP Resources:

Do We Have What We Need?

Having the necessary tools is step one for shifting to telework, as Nguyen said. Are organizations providing the necessary equipment, connection, access and security to employees?

For security purposes, having the right equipment is pertinent for the government workforce. Yet, while 71% of respondents said their agencies provided the necessary tools and equipment, fewer – 57% – said their agencies were able to enforce existing security measures (See Figures 8 and 9).

In other words, while government employees are likely to have the devices they need, they are less likely to have the security that is required.

From the beginning of the outbreak, malicious cyber actors have been feeding off of public paranoia surrounding the novel coronavirus. Add in the hundreds of thousands of

employees now working from home, and the level of risk to the government's IT environment has widened. Further, some have to use their own devices, and others rely on unsecured networks.

Government agencies such as the Health and Human Services Department (HHS) and the Champaign-Urbana Public Health District in Illinois have already been targeted, and it's likely that the threats will not stop.

One of the most common security solutions for remote work is a virtual private network (VPN), which encrypts a device's connection to an internal network. Seventy percent of respondents said that it is part of their agency's remote work strategy (See Figure 10).

But through VPN, there are some vulnerabilities that can be taken advantage of if best practices are not applied, especially in the case of personal devices, Nguyen said.

FIGURE 8

Does your agency provide the tools needed (equipment, connectivity, etc.) to telework effectively?

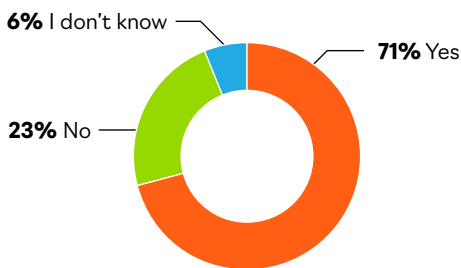
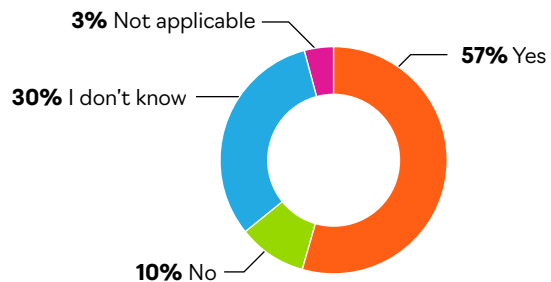


FIGURE 9

In a fully remote work environment, is your agency able to enforce existing security rules and processes?



According to the survey, 40% of all respondents use personal laptops, tablets or smartphones for work (See Figure 10).

Among federal, state and local employees, state and local employees were the most likely to use these devices – 44% and 49%, respectively (See Figure 11).

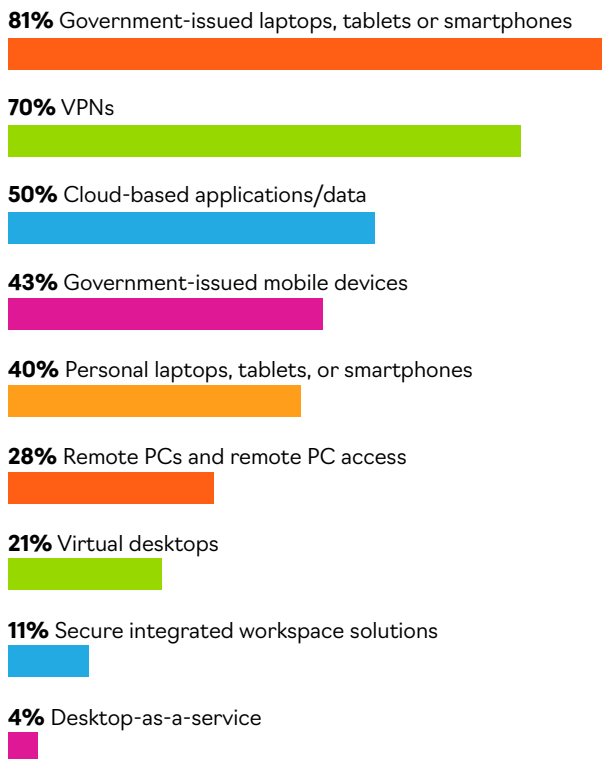
While VPN secures the device’s connection, it does not secure the device. If the device itself is not secure from viruses and malware, bad actors can infiltrate the device through, for instance, a phishing email, and then jump into the VPN and have access to the whole network, Nguyen said.

“There’s been a huge spike in the amount of malicious activity, knowing that all of a sudden, there’s hundreds of thousands of people that are working from home,” Nguyen said.

In mid-March, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) [issued an alert](#) for partner organizations regarding telework and VPNs.

FIGURE 10

Which of the following tools are part of your agency’s remote work strategy? Check all that apply.



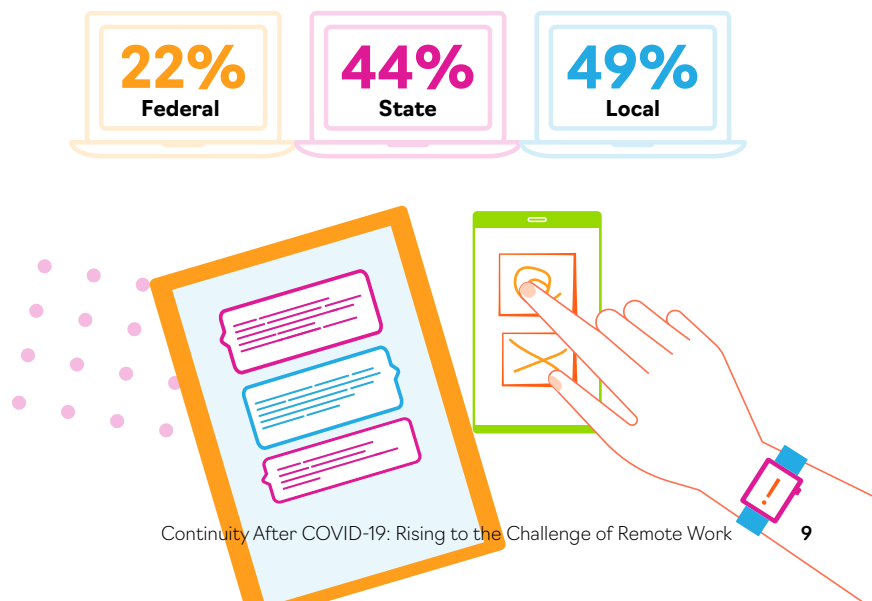
The agency identified a few key recommendations to strengthen an organization’s VPN security during this time:

- Update VPNs, network infrastructure devices and telework devices to the latest software patches
- Alert employees to be aware of an expected increase in phishing attempts
- Ensure IT personnel are prepared to ramp up the appropriate remote access cybersecurity tasks, per National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) guidance
- Implement multi-factor authentication on all VPN connections
- Ensure IT security personnel test VPN limitations to prepare for mass usage and, if possible, implement modifications for users who need higher bandwidth

These measures could be boiled down to four action items: **update software, alert all employees, support IT personnel and authenticate users.**

FIGURE 11

Those using personal devices while teleworking:



How Citrix Helps

One of the main shortcomings of VPN is the limit on people who can use the network. When only a handful of employees need to work remotely, there usually isn't a problem with increased traffic. But when all or most of an organization's workforce is forced to telework in a matter of days, existing VPN capacity will likely buckle under pressure.

"You start getting glitches, the load time starts decreasing, everything takes a long time to finish – and all of a sudden the workers can't get their jobs done," Nguyen said.

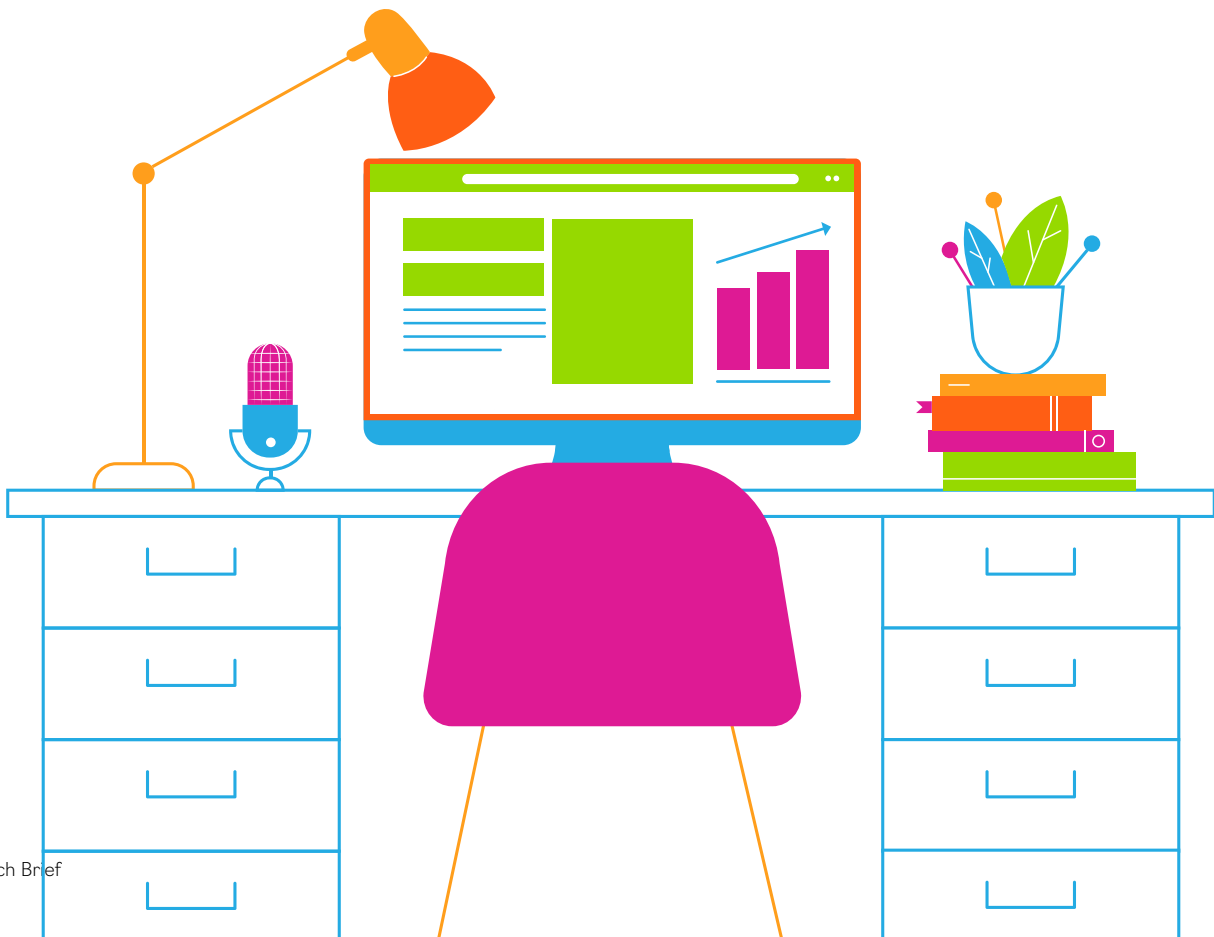
With Citrix solutions, the limits of traditional VPN can be eliminated. When it comes to COOP, it is critical that users remain productive while maintaining the necessary levels of security in accessing enterprise resources. Citrix solutions can enable seamless workforce productivity, giving employees the flexibility to work from anywhere, while keeping their applications and information secure.

Conclusion

Regardless of one's support for or skepticism of telework, it has now become the only way for many to continue essential government operations. For employees working from home, the pandemic has forced them to reshape the contours of their personal lives and workspaces. Home and the office have become one.

One of the most important elements to COOP, then, is workforce continuity, which is a strategy that ensures employees have the necessary IT and management support during an emergency.

Though government cannot predict the end to this crisis, nor the beginning of the next, preparative measures can mitigate the impacts and support its workforce. Ensuring that employees have the necessary tools to work and collaborate securely is of utmost importance in a remote environment. And above all, enabling a workforce that is healthy in both body and mind is key to COOP plans.





CITRIX Public Sector

About Citrix

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Learn more at www.citrix.com/government.



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