



The New Government Workplace Takes Shape

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Executive Summary

Ghostly government office buildings, temporarily abandoned during the COVID-19 outbreak, have begun to look like brick-and-mortar memorials to a bygone era. After the pandemic's tidal wave of disruption, the prevailing in-place work culture that has dominated government offices since World War II seems to be on shaky ground, possibly poised to crumble.

Should that happen, a new workplace seems destined to emerge from the rubble. The unplanned mass migration of government employees in the spring 2020 from traditional offices to at-home workspaces has provided a new vantage from which to think about flexible work arrangements of the future. Indeed, COVID-19 has cracked open a willingness to change. It might have happened eventually, even without a pandemic, but it's happening now.

Empowering large numbers of untethered workers to function in a more fluid and seamless work environment will require new technologies and cultural leaps — modern communications, collaboration tools and a reconsideration of what it means to manage a workforce. Robust technologies will enable employees to work efficiently, collaborate, form teams, produce deliverables and advance missions — anytime and anywhere. The rigid dichotomy of the physical and virtual workplaces will fade, replaced by a flexible and mobile work environment that will be available wherever employees' work takes them.

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In the News

The surge in telework during the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a large-scale experiment for testing alternative work arrangements and the technologies that enable them. The crisis has provided “proof points for what the future looks like,” Suzette Kent, then-Federal Chief Information Officer (CIO), said in May.

During the initial phase of the coronavirus response, agencies scrambled to meet the logistical challenge of workforce displacement. They accelerated contracts, fast-tracked and scaled solutions, made collaboration tools available to remote workers, and implemented practices in accordance with the Federal Data Strategy. Most important, they overcame institutional inertia. Many individuals who might have resisted change not only accepted it, but became comfortable with new ways of working, Kent said.

COVID-19 Stressed Infrastructure and Security

On March 17, the administration released a memorandum, through the Office of Management and Budget, directing federal agencies to “utilize the full extent of their legal authority and discretion” to realign agencies’ operations to slow the virus’ spread. Among its provisions, the memo directed agency leaders to “maximize telework across the nation for the federal workforce (including mandatory telework, if necessary), while maintaining mission-critical workforce needs.”

The action resulted in some predictable outcomes. Telework increased and use of virtual-private networking (VPN) in the United

States shot up 53% from early to mid-March, the Congressional Research Service (CRS) reported. Initially, IT infrastructure sagged beneath heavy use, and analysts questioned whether infrastructure could handle increased loads indefinitely.

The potential for cyberattacks has risen during the pandemic, too. Always seeking to exploit high-profile events, cyber attackers have tried to manipulate public concern to entice and trick users, CRS said. Reports of phishing attempts have increased, according to security firms and media reports. The rush to implement a large-scale shift to telework afforded “little time for administrators to check their networks, improve policies and apply updates,” CRS said, adding:

They may be using unsecured home networks or devices (e.g., unpatched equipment) to access agency information. Agencies may have had to increase network access rapidly to allow for maximum telework, without establishing, testing, and refining security measures to protect data. Even with security measures in place within an agency’s network, the proverbial “perimeter” of the agency’s network is extended well beyond its baseline posture with many more employees teleworking.

Defense Agencies Take Fight to Pandemic

The Air Force was already amid a major digital modernization initiative when COVID-19 began its global march. The service could have throttled back that effort until the pandemic passed. It chose to engage the afterburners.

Since March, the Air Force has accelerated some digital modernization goals to support telework. Fast-track provisions have sought to enhance the service’s digital enterprise and bolster

cybersecurity. The service expanded VPN access and put in place an enterprisewide digitization of telework agreement documentation between airmen and -women and supervisors. New cloud capabilities are making it easier to deliver digital services and mission applications.

“We want to increase our connectivity...and provide anywhere, anytime global access to the information and applications that the airmen actually need,” said Air Force Chief Technology Officer Frank Konieczny, speaking during a GovLoop webinar this summer.

To further support telework, the Air Force has introduced laptops and other devices tailored to work with the Defense Department’s Non-classified and Secret IP Router networks. The service also provided specialized software-based secure video and test mobile phone capabilities.

The New Normal, So Far

Before March of this year, the likelihood that federal workers could successfully move to full-time telework, quickly and en masse, seemed unlikely. A few months later, it’s fair to say that the unprecedented ad hoc mass mobilization of a flexible workforce has been a success.

“It was just a massive effort for which there was no playbook. I commend all these people for how resilient they have been, and how quickly they have recovered their missions,” said Alan Shark, Executive Director of the Public Technology Institute.

The performance of teleworkers at the General Accountability Office has been “a little bit of a surprise,” said Vijay D’Souza, the agency’s Director of Information Technology and Cybersecurity, during a forum in June. “By some measures, our productivity is increasing.”

And the Education Department’s workforce has “been more productive during the COVID situation than at almost any time in the past,” said Steven Hernandez, the department’s Chief Information Security Officer, in May.

Inspectors General Flag Concerns

Successes notwithstanding, a watchdog group of inspectors general (IGs) overseeing the government’s pandemic response has raised concerns about agencies’ ability to manage IT systems, support telework and continue secure operations. Some challenges the Council of Inspectors General on Integrity and Efficiency’s Pandemic Response Accountability Committee flagged include:

- The Office of Personnel Management’s Office of the IG (OIG) reported concerns about the ability of aging infrastructure to handle sudden increases in workloads.
- Multiple OIGs have reported that the surge in telework has strained continuity of efficient and secure operations. That has raised the risk of security breaches, the OIG at the Environmental Protection Agency said.
- The IG at the National Reconnaissance Office cited the risk of inadvertent data spills and disclosures of classified information by employees performing unclassified work at home.
- The Peace Corps OIG reported the persistent lack of an effective information security program.
- The Treasury IG for Tax Administration expects a surge in investigative activity as “bad actors” attempt to steal Economic Impact Payments from taxpayers by attacking Internal Revenue Service systems.

Need to Know

The first stage of the government's response to COVID-19 was textbook triage: stop the bleeding and help the patient survive the immediate crisis. Having largely succeeded, federal agencies have moved into stage two, an assessment of organizations' systemic health, to answer a pressing question: In a fast-changing environment, are federal agencies sufficiently flexible to support new ways of working that support their missions?

Before issuing clean bills of health, agencies will consider multiple factors that will inform next steps: IT infrastructure deficits, funds for making upgrades, technologies that support a more mobile workforce, cultural changes, cybersecurity, expanded use of cloud computing and other critical measures of organizational health.

Pandemic Spending Could Jump-start Workplace Transformation

It remains to be seen whether the federal response to the pandemic is strictly an exercise in crisis management or something more. Workplace reform advocates hope that the response will be a springboard to a more nimble, flexible, mobile, tech-supported workforce, one that can advance agencies' missions with greater efficiency.

Getting there will take a sustained effort. Digital transformation requires long-term planning, execution and a reliable source of funds. Such undertakings are multiyear commitments, Kent said, in June.

Pandemic Threatens the Health of IT Security

Telling hundreds of thousands of government workers to leave the office and work from home indefinitely is a nightmare scenario for IT security professionals. Maintaining security is challenging enough when most work is done at secure offices. For many federal agencies, security protocols developed to protect assets inside security perimeters aren't optimized for remote work on a large scale.

During COVID-19, the constellation of users, or endpoints, with access to federal networks exploded like particles emitted by a supernova. In a flash, the size of federal agencies' attack surfaces expanded exponentially, increasing the risk of security breaches. Seeing an opportunity, cyber attackers immediately increased their level of activity, launching more phishing attacks and other types of exploits.

Agencies have scrambled to provide secure access to VPNs. They elevated Domain Name System security to provide workers with secure access to agency resources and to defend against malware. Agency leaders and vendors called on the government to invest in identity and access management, zero trust, multifactor identification, and other solutions for securing systems serving a widely dispersed workforce.

In April, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency released interim guidance for the Trusted Internet Connections 3.0 initiative. Better known as TIC 3.0, the program upgrades security protocols for federal employees connecting to agency networks, on premises and in the cloud, from remote locations.

In March, a GovLoop survey asked federal workers if their agency was able to enforce existing security rules and processes in a fully remote work environment. Only 57% of respondents answered yes.



Is Culture Really Changing?

A pair of cultural currents flowing through the federal government will largely determine the shape and trajectory of agencies' future workspaces.

First is the general acceptance of flexible work arrangements, a phenomenon whose stock has fluctuated in recent years. From 2012 to 2016, telework in the federal government rose sharply, from 14% of all employees to 22%, a 57% spike. Among employees eligible to telework, the percentage of teleworkers rose from 29% to 51%.

Since then, telework participation has leveled off. Between 2016 and 2018, the last year for which data is available, telework participation for eligible employees and all employees remained steady, at 51% and 22%, respectively.

Reports of pushback against telework during the current administration combined with longstanding reluctance to embrace off-premises work arrangements explain the cooling off. The Agriculture Department is among a group of agencies that in recent years cut telework programs. As recently as the early stages of the government's response to the pandemic, some managers were

reluctant to grant permission for telework until the enormity of the crisis overwhelmed their demurrals.

Despite acknowledgment that the government's teleworking experiment has largely succeeded, dormant skepticism of telework could reemerge after the COVID-19 crisis ends.

The second cultural trend poised to shape the future workspace is the government's generally slow pace of adopting new technologies, a process hampered by a bureaucratic procurement pipeline. Government agencies don't often pursue innovation with the same urgency as their for-profit counterparts.

Yet there are exceptions. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), for one, has charged ahead with IT modernization during the pandemic, encouraging employees to acquire skills in human-centered design, cloud technology and cybersecurity.

In June, CMS CIO Rajiv Uppal said the agency encourages workers to acquire new skills because "we need to have a culture where people feel that they can go and try things."

Building Blocks

The federal government's unprecedented telework initiative in response to COVID-19 has opened a door to more flexible and efficient workspaces. After the crisis passes, agencies can take advantage of that opening to continue modernizing the way government works or they can fall back into pre-pandemic work routines and continue doing business as usual.

Agencies that seek to enable a modernized workforce that is more mobile, more efficient and more capable of advancing government's missions will focus on a few critical areas:

- Upgrading and integrating workplace technologies
- Creating work environments that maximize innovation and productivity
- Enabling effective teams that collaborate easily
- Modernizing workplace culture

Flexible, Mobile Workspaces

Government agencies have performed well during the crisis, but the surge in telework nonetheless revealed challenges, including the extent to which some agencies continue to rely on manual and paper-based processes. At the Housing and Urban Development Department, 40% of respondents to a survey said that limited access to records resulted in agency processes being scaled back, changed or suspended.

On the other end of the digital divide, CMS worked with a vendor to develop the CMS Employee Roll Call Bot, an automated tool that provides senior leaders with a single source to understand the status of the agency's workforce. "Automated technology can help heighten... productivity and morale," an agency spokesperson said.

Agencies that had endeavored to modernize their technology before the pandemic seem to have weathered the crisis with fewer problems than agencies that have made less progress toward digital transformation. When the pandemic hit, the Small Business Administration (SBA) was already in the cloud with Microsoft Office 365 and had started migrating to a software-defined wide-area network. Infrastructure was in place that has enabled 4,000 people to work remotely. Similarly, the Veterans Affairs Department (VA) responded to the pandemic by quickly expanding its telework and telemedicine programs, major undertakings that have largely been successful. (Read more about them on p. 11.)

A more mobile and flexible workplace will emerge at agencies only if the prevailing culture evolves to support it.

Taming Technology

Moving from crisis operations to the workplace of the future will be a journey. Employees will need better tools, including process automation, virtual assistants, embedded communications and enhanced mobility, to increase efficiency and enable workers to fully leverage their skills and talents.

It won't be easy. The creation of data-driven organizations, a goal of the federal government, hasn't yet succeeded in a substantial way. Most workers don't have the tools they need to develop innovations based on insights derived from data, to improve the customer experience or to more efficiently drive mission attainment. Rather, workers are inundated by uncoordinated communications technology. Drowning in information, they nonetheless lack insights.

Agencies must simplify workplaces' redundant and fragmented technological landscape. In many organizations, it's not uncommon for workers to juggle multiple communications and collaboration apps, including email, voice calls, chat and SMS, among others.

Proliferation of so-called "digital clutter" saps productivity. According to [Smartsheet](#), almost half of organizations use six or more collaboration apps. Hopping in and out of applications wastes up to 32 days of employee productivity annually, according to Avaya.

What's needed is a way to winnow the universe of applications and consolidate them into a centralized platform or hub with a single feed for optimal management. In the future, agencies' mobile workforces will rely on a single pane of glass to efficiently manage communication and collaboration.

Collaboration

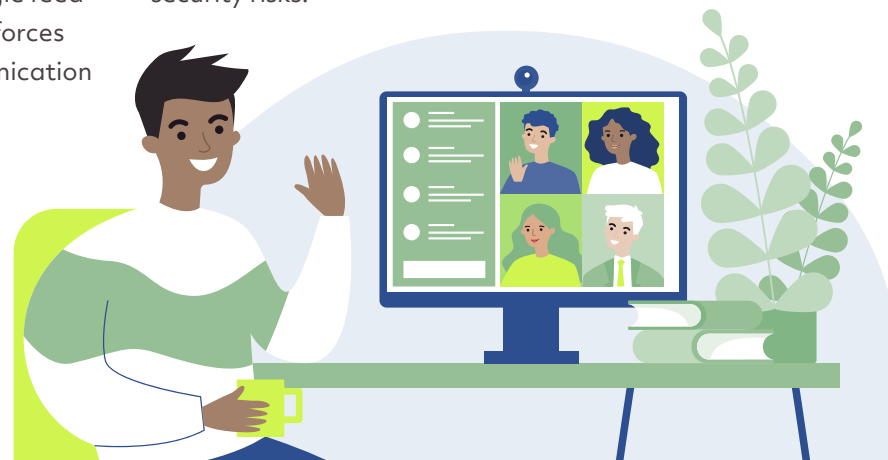
Among the workplace issues that the government's surge in telework highlighted is the extent to which technology and culture enable or hinder collaboration among members of a mobile workforce. Dispersed employees' ability to collaborate and advance agencies' missions is essential. Yet, the record of the past few months has been mixed.

At SBA, teams and programs relied on digital collaboration tools — chat, video and document sharing — to communicate and collaborate. Usage of the tools "went through the roof," Maria Roat, Deputy Federal CIO, said in July.

IT-enabled collaboration can break down, however, when members of a team don't work for the same agency. The challenges of working across organizational lines hamper agencies' ability to solve them. "I'd really like to see more cross-government usage of the collaboration capabilities," Roat said.

To enable better collaboration, agencies will consider unified communications solutions that combine calling, messaging, meetings and team collaboration — functionality that enables better-connected, more-responsive teams. Virtual war rooms allow people to collaborate through voice, video and persistent chat that integrates with document storage and task management.

The best user-friendly applications raise productivity while reducing security risks.



Remote Work Experience Highlights Value of Unified Communications

An interview with Jeff Lunsford, Area Director, Civilian Federal Sales; and Steve Sturiale, Account Manager, Avaya Government Solutions

After months of having many employees working remotely, federal agencies have learned to think in a new way about resilience.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, agencies primarily thought about resilience in ensuring the continuity of operations and services in the wake of a disruptive event.

Today, agencies realize that resilience is about more than disaster recovery and business continuity. It is about ensuring that employees have access to the tools and resources they need to do their jobs no matter where they are working.

To learn more about this understanding of resilience, GovLoop spoke with executives from Avaya Government Solutions, which provides unified communications and collaboration tools to offices and call centers across government.

Required: A seamless work environment

The shift to remote work gave many agencies new insight into the resilience of their operations.

Agencies that adopted collaboration tools to support telework in pre-pandemic days had a relatively smooth transition, said Jeff Lunsford, Area Director, Civilian Federal Sales, Avaya Government Solutions. But others were overwhelmed, including some call centers, he said.

Agencies scrambled to provide employees with the right tools, but those tools, if they were different from what employees used in the office, often involved a steep learning curve, which could hurt productivity.

That is why Avaya designed its Unified Communications as a Service (UCaaS) tools to deliver the same functionality and the same user experience no matter which device employees are using. That consistency shortens the learning curve and creates a more seamless work environment.

It's the same principle behind car design, Lunsford said. "It doesn't matter what car you rent, the gas pedal's always on the right," he said.

Improving on normal

This seamless work environment is not merely a temporary fix to the challenge of remote work. Once agencies begin taking full advantage of UCaaS capabilities, they likely will not want to go back to the so-called normal way of doing business.

Here are four benefits that UCaaS tools can bring to organizations or teams:

Improved engagement. Although it's fashionable to talk about "video fatigue," there is no doubt that employees are more engaged on video versus voice calls, said Steve Sturiale, Account Manager with Avaya Government Solutions.

Expanded collaboration. In a traditional office environment, people tend to collaborate best with those nearby. A virtual environment changes those dynamics, making it easier to incorporate a more diverse mix of talent, Sturiale said.

More input from key stakeholders. Senior leaders or subject matter experts often will say they don't have the time to join an in-person meeting and offer feedback. But a 15-minute video conference? That feels more doable, Lunsford said.

Mitigation of communication stovepipes. Many organizations have learned to work around cross-department communication incompatibilities simply by talking in person. Once they put UCaaS in place, they will find that they can collaborate more efficiently and effectively, said Sturiale.

Such benefits could pay off in the long term, as the pandemic reshapes the workforce. Although workers will be returning to the office, **"many [CIOs] expect that the percentage of remote workers will never return to pre-COVID levels," Lunsford said.**



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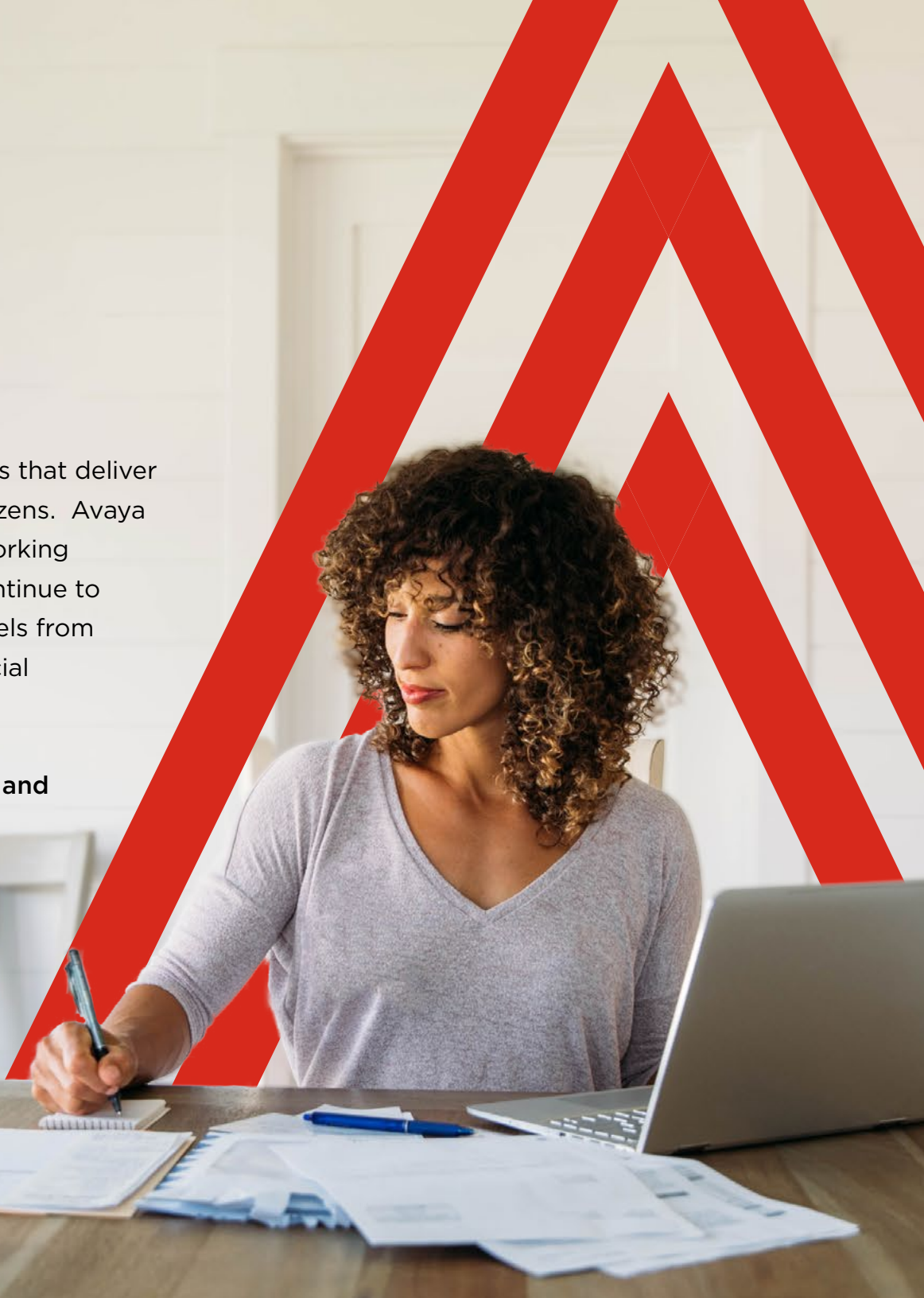
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When the Pandemic Hit, VA Hit Back with Technology

The bar for dealing with COVID-related challenges was higher for some federal agencies than others. Earlier this year, VA was made responsible for developing and executing large-scale programs to protect its workforce, slow the spread of the virus, and continue to provide health care to 9 million veterans at 170 VA medical centers and more than 1,000 outpatient sites. To learn more about the VA's response, we spoke with David Catanoso, Director of the Enterprise Cloud Solutions Office (ECSO) at VA, and Lia Burrus, Senior Analyst at ESCO.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity and length.

GovLoop: Tell us about the increase in telework among federal workers during the pandemic.

Catanoso: The VA has been on an IT modernization track for several years, particularly as it relates to the way we manage data and migrate it to the cloud. We've improved our security posture and digital business transformation, and we're starting to move away from legacy systems. In March, we were told to do it faster and to expand telework and telehealth.

What has gone particularly well these last four months?

Catanoso: The big focus for us here at the Enterprise Cloud and VA has been expanding telework and telehealth. We went from nearly 60,000 people teleworking on any given day to doubling the number of users. We now have a capacity of more than 500,000 users. We also looked at bandwidth, expanding the number and capacity of Trusted Internet Connections (TIC) gateways, and the systems we use for telework. We also started expanding efforts in other technologies that help people work from home.

To support more telemedicine, we expanded our video conferencing capability, expanding into the cloud with Care2 Cloud. The Care2 Cloud telehealth expansion is a standalone environment that leverages VAEC-AWS Hosted Commercial Cloud instances to reduce latency and increase redundancy. It provides us with the flexibility to scale up or down as demand changes by adding capacity for 5000-plus peak concurrent conferences. With Care2 Cloud, VA medical providers and patients can experience HD quality calls, which can make a significant difference for cases requiring viewing of images and similar situations.

What has been most challenging?

Catanoso: Having to adapt our processes to work at a different pace -- and the supply chain. Getting the physical infrastructure in place was a challenge, but we managed to do it in record time.

How have you changed processes?

Catanoso: In a normal world, the process for improving network changes or firewall rules or acquisition processes would be to put an acquisition out for bid, approve the acquisition and award it. If we had followed that track, we'd still be trying to get the first thing done.

What surprises have you encountered?

Catanoso: We came together as a team. A lot of cross-functional organizations that hadn't been working in a crisis mode were able to get things done.

Teleworking during a pandemic can be isolating. How's the workforce? What are you doing to help?

Burrus: They're doing pretty well, actually. Our team, the Enterprise Cloud Solutions Office, has a weekly virtual water cooler meeting. You're not allowed to talk about work. People let their hair down.

Catanoso: I think everybody kind of adapted. I think we're going to see a lot more of this.

More teleworking?

Catanoso: I think telework and telemedicine is here to stay.

How much of a challenge was it to get hardware into the hands of teleworkers?

Catanoso: There was a surge in mobile devices, phones and laptops, and we set records in terms of how fast we were able to procure and distribute them to the workforce. We worked closely with Amazon and Azure to make sure that if we wanted to scale to a certain size, EC2 or Azure VM in a certain region or availability zone, those VM would be there when we needed them.

What can you say about cybersecurity during this challenging time?

Catanoso: We have a very strong cybersecurity arm here at the VA, and we work very closely with them as part of our cloud initiative. We expanded telework using our current perimeter with our Citrix capability and began leveraging the new DHS TIC 3.0 construct, which we've used for our Care2 expansion in the cloud, as well as with the Azure Virtual, Windows Virtual Desktop and our App Stream CPRS, Cloud CPRS.

Has the experience of the past few months changed the mindset of telework skeptics?

Catanoso: I think there's a positive perception among managers who may have been skeptical of telework. They've had to get comfortable with it really quick.

How do you balance the advantages of office-based and telework environments?

Burrus: As far as our team's concerned, there is a strong desire to have face-to-face interactions, all hands meetings or multiday events even. We're doing it virtually right now, and it's working well. I think it's going to be a mix.

Catanoso: The technology is going to become more capable in this realm, especially in the new VDI solutions. They will enable you to work wherever you are. There's going to be some missions that will require you to physically be in a certain location, and we'll adapt the workforce to the mission.

Even though COVID is far from over, what do you think you'll take away from it?

Catanoso: This COVID exercise is a great learning experience for the VA, and not only for how we accomplish things from an IT standpoint, with agile and cloud and DevSecOps, but also for how we work. Now we can learn to apply those tools to get the job done. Yes, it's about accomplishing the mission.

What might change about workplace culture after this crisis is over?

Catanoso: Having done amazing things in the last four months, we're more open to alternative work methods and modes of work. The pandemic accelerated people's experience with technology, something that maybe they'd been avoiding before.

Against COVID-19, SBA Leveraged Agility, Innovation

The Small Business Administration has played a key role in administering emergency programs during the pandemic. To fulfill its mission despite challenging circumstances, SBA relied on its expertise in responding to disasters. The agency's culture of technological innovation further benefitted its response. A lesson from SBA's experience is that ongoing initiatives toward IT modernization tend to prepare agencies for unexpected emergencies. To learn more about SBA's response, we spoke with Guy Cavallo, who was then deputy chief information officer at Small Business Administration. Cavallo was recently named principal deputy CIO for the Office of Personnel Management.

This interview has been lightly edited for clarity and length.

GovLoop: Overall, how has SBA responded to the pandemic?

Cavallo: SBA overnight went to near 100% telework, quadrupling the number of teleworkers. When COVID-19 hit, we were in the middle of switching from a traditional VPN connection to a cloud edge security connection. It gives us better cybersecurity protection, a faster connection for users, and a better user experience.

Having laptops and tablets instead of desktop computers was a critical part of our telework success, a transition we had been making over the last five years. We accelerated our deployment of Microsoft Teams, and we're moving to Mobile Teams right now.

Are you surprised at how well it has gone?

Cavallo: Much of SBA's history is disaster response — you can't support a disaster by sitting in your office cube — so we had a culture of what to do.

What else did you do prior to the pandemic that helped?

Cavallo: Being on Office 365 was a huge advantage. If I was still trying to manage email with on-premises servers, we would have absolutely collapsed.

Also, when this hit, we were in the process of completing a pilot of virtual desktops in the cloud. Instead of equipping surge contractors with government furnished laptops or tablets, which were almost impossible to buy during the crisis, we've allowed them to connect to our virtual desktop. I have more virtual desktops in the cloud today than I had employees on March 1.

How have the cloud and the mobile workforce performed?

Cavallo: To implement the Payroll Protection Program and the Idle Disaster Loans, we brought up six different cloud-based systems in less than eight days. Teleworkers built systems that allowed small businesses and citizens to access grants and loans under the CARES Act.

What about cybersecurity? How do you ensure that remote work is safe and secure?

Cavallo: We've moved to 100% cloud native cybersecurity protection. We see everything that's going on with any connection that tries to access our network. If you're not in the U.S., you can't connect to our websites to apply for an EIDL (Economic Injury Disaster Loan) or a PPP (Paycheck Protection Program) loan. Instead of the traditional SOC where people passively watch 25 monitors, we're using artificial intelligence. DHS has worked with us over the last two years to demonstrate the power of cloud cybersecurity. We've helped them rewrite a federal policy for the trusted internet connections (TIC) initiative and the continual diagnostic and mitigation (CDM) program.

Is there anything else about workplace culture that helped SBA to transition quickly?

Cavallo: One culture change that I hope continues is our being allowed to hire workers wherever we can find them. I have people working for me now who are in Texas and Ohio and California who never would have accepted a job that required them to move to D.C.

Are managers who once were reluctant to embrace telework more amenable to it now?

Cavallo: If they're open to it, they'll see the benefits and learn from it. If they were closed to it, they're not going to change.

"I've seen a lot of really good people have to leave government jobs because a spouse or significant other got a job across the country. Why don't we keep that employee? If they're a great employee in Washington, wouldn't they be a great employee somewhere else?"

Can we eliminate the rigid dichotomy between office workers and teleworkers?

Cavallo: I've seen a lot of really good people have to leave government jobs because a spouse or significant other got a job across the country. Why don't we keep that employee? If they're a great employee in Washington, wouldn't they be a great employee somewhere else?

What else needs to change in workplace culture?

Cavallo: For someone who's a top performer in the office, there's a 99.9% chance that they'll be a top performer remotely. Somebody who is a below average or a minimal performer is not all of a sudden going to become a top performer working remotely. We need to hold people accountable and change personnel rules to reward top performers and, if need be, encourage underperformers to look for another job or be removed. That will be difficult to do with a remote workforce under the present rules.

Do these changes bode well for a more nimble, flexible workforce that's better able to advance the missions and goals of agencies?

Cavallo: Definitely. The federal government is always in competition with the private sector for top talent. Having flexibility to mentor long distance and to leverage younger workers' computer skills are going to be key for us to start bringing in the next generation of government workers.

Next Steps

The federal government's response to COVID-19, most notably the unprecedented mobilization of a massive teleworkforce, has cracked open a portal to workspaces of the future. Driven from traditional offices by necessity and temporarily unburdened by bureaucratic constraints, agencies have discovered possibilities afforded by work environments that are mobile, flexible, collaborative and supported by innovative cloud-enabled technology.

Governmentwide, a favorable response to the crisis has spurred agencies to jettison paper processes in favor of digitization, fast-track modernization initiatives, focus attention on work processes primed for overhaul, reevaluate technology that supports flexible work, envision collaboration in the absence of physical proximity and rethink their aversion to telework itself.

So where do we go from here? In one scenario, the pandemic ends and government agencies return to business as usual.

That's not likely to happen, according to government workers and managers. Hundreds of thousands of feds have glimpsed the future — fewer or no commutes, casual Friday every day, remote connectivity that works, the advantages of digital processes, technology-enabled collaboration — and they mostly like what they see there.

Alternatively, agencies could continue on the path toward a massively flexible workforce and not look back. That's unlikely, as well. Despite the many successes of the government's Dunkirk-esque response to the pandemic, emergency actions taken of necessity are an experiment — a clinical trial vs. a mass-produced vaccine — albeit an experiment that has gone well.

Most observers predict that agencies will embrace a hybrid approach, expanding telework programs and the systems that support flexible work, even as some workers return to offices. Some agencies will enable even office workers to work remotely, as needed, thereby eroding the dichotomy between them and teleworkers. Ideally, every worker will be equipped to advance the mission of an agency, anytime and anywhere. For that to happen, agencies will need to find the right mix of cloud capacity, robust communication and collaboration tools, cybersecurity, and cultural shifts, including new ways of managing mobile workers.



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