Agencies See Telework, Information Management Vital For Future Workforce

Federal tech executives tout knowledge sharing and organizational reforms crucial for enabling remote work.

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Wed, 03/18/2020 - 17:21

The Department of Energy has outlined workforce training and technology reforms that will empower federal agencies to best embrace teleworking and data-sharing capacities.
Discussing how current technology might preempt future transformation, the department's Associate Deputy Assistant Secretary for Resource Management Melody Bell noted the importance of focusing on agency-wide data sharing and technical training.

“People are critical... but how are we building up the next generation to follow us?” she said at the ACT-IAC virtual conference March 17.

As a broader solution, Bell described the agency's efforts to create knowledge databases that can be built up by contributors and accessed by their successors.

“One of the things I've been working on has been empowerment and engagement, creating peer coaching has been a phenomenal resource that we utilize ... where we put up systems and tools using SharePoint and other database systems to house our knowledge. As part of our coaching program, we've asked each of our subject matter experts to put their information in the database,” Bell said.

Bell was quick to note how questions of remote work and information access are of critical importance in the wake of the COVID-19 epidemic, with the pandemic accelerating already vital discussion about how to empower civil servants to embrace teleworking.

“During this pandemic, we’re obviously being told to keep our social distance ... the future of our workers will be more into this virtual world where we need these tools,” Bell said.

However, Bell was up front about how most federal agencies lack the current preparedness and infrastructure to implement long-term teleworking for the bulk of their workforce.

“Yet we don’t have the bandwidth for everyone to be online at the same time. That’s a physical challenge,” Bell conceded.

Another challenge area Bell outlined is the current over-reliance on email, a markedly inefficient form of file sharing and collaboration. The solution appears rest in large part on a broader shift to the cloud, especially as a means of ensuring workers have concurrent access to the most up-to-date version of a project or business product.
“Another challenge is we rely on emailing too much ... we’re not using our cloud and SharePoint tools to have files where we can collectively work on various documents and have the same information at the same time,” Bell said.

In tandem with these concerns around telework capacity and information sharing, Bell was keen to note the consistent difficulty that federal agencies encounter in competing against private sector firms in the drive for younger tech talent. The solution, Bell proposed, lies in emphasizing the impact and importance of civil service — especially as a means of bettering the lives of millions of Americans.

“We’re not attracting that next generation of talent to government because it’s hard to compete with Facebook, Google, Apple. Except one thing we can compete with is through national security as our mission. You’re going to be coming in, adding value, making a difference and not just sitting in a cubicle and working on one isolated widget. So we have the value of our mission we can sell,” Bell said.

Nevertheless, this may also require widespread changes in office practices — including making greater room for remote employment.

“We also need to be savvy enough to recognize the next generation of workers — they work differently. They’re very used to data and the digital world, and working more virtually, as well as telework," Bell said. "We’re going to have to be flexible on work-life balance, and flexible on telework ... we really have to look at new ways to attract and retain this generation if we really want to be successful."

In terms of more immediate reforms, Bell recommended that federal agencies consider a gradual transitory process that tests potential problem areas before a wider shift toward large-scale telework.

“We are considering giving people more flexible work hours so not everyone is on the system at the exact same time. Right now we’re having a critical challenge with bandwidth, and everyone tapping the system at the same time. We’re just talking about people adjusting their hours and adjusting the number of people on the system at once,” Bell said.
Bell also outlined that both leadership and the broader workforce will need to become comfortable with their agencies embracing ongoing change as a means of sustaining business lines while implementing large-scale reforms.

“The change will need to be constant. That means systems, that means tools, that means techniques, that means models. And we need to encourage that in our workforce," Bell said. Leadership "needs to challenge ourselves to be a part of that."

Still, despite the scope of the changes at hand, Bell remained optimistic that the outcome would be a more efficient, integrated workforce that would prove resilient against unforeseen challenges like the COVID-19 epidemic.

“I think we need to look at this as a great opportunity that we can really leverage on an exponential scale moving forward,” Bell concluded.