End-User Focus Set Up CMS for Easy Transition to Remote Work

Preemptive stand-up of teleconferencing and easing employee work with IT helped the agency to go fully remote within days.

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Human-centered design and proactive modernization allowed the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to swiftly adjust to remote work and continued service to the public as the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated.
The agency’s Chief Operating Officer Jennifer Main and CIO Rajiv Uppal touched upon the impact of their long-term end user focus in building up CMS IT during Monday’s FedHealthIT Innovation Awards. They shared that expanding telework capabilities, a move to the cloud and overall equipping the CMS workforce with modern IT capabilities made adjusting to pandemic-induced remote work relatively smooth.

“What we focused on was enabling ourselves to continue doing our jobs in a fully remote capacity,” Main said. “In the middle of March, the entire agency pretty quickly went and [in] a little over a weekend moved from pretty much everyone working in 15 or so facilities around the country to fully remote.”

CMS had started expanding new telework technologies like Webex within the past couple of years and Zoom this past winter to invest in a user-focused future of work for CMS, the leaders said.

The ramping up of video and telework conferencing and the expansion of cloud capabilities led the IT help desk to see little to no net increase in calls and tickets as CMS went fully remote in March.

“If you look at the calls before and after we went remote, there’s actually almost no difference, which brings up the point that the transition was early, and a lot of that goes to how you’ve been preparing,” Uppal said.

While CMS has strategized its modernization and IT around the end user in recent years, Main said that COVID-19 has accelerated faster and further, adding that the pandemic has pushed demand for data insights and for the organization to have bolder but measured actions in its deployment and vision of CMS IT. Projects like dashboarding and work around data have especially grown in correlation with the pandemic.

“In the pandemic, you’ve got an even further boost because you want to know everyday where real-time markings stood on any number of developments, so we wanted to create an operations dashboard. We’ve been doing executive dashboard work for over a year now. We took some of the things we’ve been working on on the operations side, and we just were able to accelerate it so much faster because some of the people’s fears and shackles sort of came off,” Main said.
Moving forward, Main and Uppal stressed that they will continue focusing operations on people, process and capacity, adding that skilling the workforce and leveraging automation will be mainstays for their work.

“There’s a whole set of things around people and investing in our people and how we hire and retain, especially giving people a chance to really keep developing their skills while they’re with us,” Main said. “We’ve done a bunch of work around improving our processing — things like using RPA and other intelligent automation, I think there’s a mountain of opportunity there.”

Uppal added that building a robust cloud infrastructure, providing services to enable teams across CMS to migrate their data centers to the cloud, as well as implementing Agile methodologies are other key initiatives that his office is focusing on moving forward.

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