Telework Demands Accelerate USAF Digital Modernization

Effects of the pandemic on the workforce are pushing the Air Force's digital modernization efforts.

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The U.S. Air Force's adjustments to strong demand for telework capabilities has pushed the military service toward its digital modernization goals of strengthening both its digital enterprise and cybersecurity capabilities.
Air Force Chief Technology Officer Frank Konieczny outlined his organization’s long-standing digital modernization goals during Wednesday’s GovLoop webinar. His ultimate goal is to provide a secure, integrated, enterprise-wide digital environment that supports both airmen and critical partners.

“We are pushing right now ... to provide, anytime, anywhere, global access," he said. "We always want to ensure and have the right devices with an often integrated enterprise-wide collaboration environment with mature capabilities to enable mission applications, core services and enterprise integration."

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Air Force began accelerating many of its digital modernization efforts forward at a much faster rate, Konieczny said. The service had to scale up VPN access to support telework and moved to digitize telework agreement documentation between airmen and supervisors across the enterprise.

Providing connectivity has become a strong focus for the service amid telework demand, but part of the modernization initiative already involved expanding LTE and 5G commercial connectivity across all air bases. So far, 10 bases are working with vendors toward this end, with 20 more bases to come in the next two to three months and all 50 within the next few years.

“We want to increase our connectivity, and that’s part of our digital enterprise, so we do provide anywhere, anytime global access to the information and applications that the airmen actually need,” Konieczny said.

At the same time, the Air Force has been pushing to provide its workforce with both non-classified and secret internet protocol router laptops and devices while also launching a “bring-your-own-approved-device” pilot so that airmen and key partners can leverage the increased connective access. The service has also introduced specialized software-based secure video and test mobile phone capabilities, which are critical to making telework more successful, Konieczny added.

To better manage the Air Force’s request system for requester, supervisor and funds approvals, Konieczny said that the service has introduced digital signatures and automation into the approval process, expediting these processes as more employees move online. These digital signature and authorization processes are also backed with improved security capabilities.
Cloud capabilities have enabled the delivery of better digital services and mission applications throughout all of these efforts, which Konieczny's team is accomplishing in multiple ways.

“We have small business innovation research efforts that are out there right now,” he said. “How can you actually process new capabilities in a test environment? ... We have various [memoranda of understanding] and contract approvals because it is a contract that we have to sign, and we've been digitally signing these and actually progressing ahead. So even though most of the Air Force is at home teleworking, we are still actually doing small business research right now.”

Konieczny said he hopes the progress the Air Force has made in its modernization efforts and rapid change that his organization has enabled will continue in the future. Moving forward, he wants to especially continue implementing various digital processing capabilities to improve the way employees work and further move into a virtual environment.

“What you’re going to see is a lot of security. You want to maintain mission, and that’s what we are effectively doing right now [and] digital transformation is occurring as we speak,” Konieczny said.

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