Technology Strategy Essential for Federal Return to Work

A cohesive IT framework is foundational for supporting a return to on-site activity. Adam Patterson
Thu, 07/23/2020 - 11:08

Measures for bringing government workers back on site will require supporting a digital IT strategy and empowering federal technology executives to become key decision-makers.
The demands of the COVID-19 pandemic have necessitated a rapid and abrupt shift to remote work, a process that has required a certain degree of improvisation from almost all federal agencies. This has been an especially demanding process for larger agencies, like the Department of Veterans Affairs, that have a substantial and nationwide scope of responsibilities.

“We had to enable our workforce to telework — we’ve seen something like 50% more telework. And a lot of folks didn’t even have the equipment to do that," said Jim Trinka, chief talent management officer at the Veterans Affairs Office of Information & Technology, during the Future of Work virtual event Wednesday. "We had to order something like 125,000 laptops and 100,000 iPhones. We’ve got in more than half of those now, and in setting up those for use we had to increase our bandwidth for telehealth."

While this has often encompassed a substantial investment in the technology necessary to support remote employees, the transition to telework has also resulted in certain cultural changes across federal agencies, including closer collaboration between dispersed project teams and the organization’s technology authorities.

“We started a weekly employee engagement connection call with our CIO every week, and we got on average 4,000 people on it every week. We’ve had 15 of those to date to keep everyone up to speed," Trinka said.

While agencies have quickly adapted to a teleworking paradigm as a public health precaution, the questions of how and when to safely return to on-site work remain challenging to conclusively resolve.

“Returning into a work space I think is infinitely more complicated during this time when you have the risks of a pandemic," said Jonathan Aloum, principal digital strategist at ServiceNow. "It doesn’t seem like it should be hard, but the devil is in the details. Including understanding if employees are ready to return to work, and understanding sentiment."

Creating a workplace safe to return to amid COVID-19 requires myriad overlapping logistical considerations, a complicated array of preparations and contingencies that require serious and deliberate planning to execute responsibly.
“From a physical perspective inside the office, how do you create workspaces that are safe for physical distancing?” Alboum said. “How do you move employees to a shift mentality where some come in on Monday and some come in on Tuesday so you have fewer people in the office? And how do you manage all the PPE that’s necessary, whether it’s gloves, masks, or cleaning supplies and hand sanitizer?”

Considering the sheer volume of overlapping considerations that need to be managed simultaneously in order to allow employees to return to the office, federal executives are beginning to rely increasingly on their IT talent to help organize these preparations and approach more digital solutions.

“All of those little questions — independently they don’t seem overwhelming, but taken together they create a lot of complexity. I really believe agencies are relying on technology to solve those problems and make workflows simpler and bring people back into the office safely,” Alboum said.

While agency IT departments are taking a more prominent role in organizational management, technology leadership is also focusing more on fostering both customer and broader employee engagement to ensure satisfactory outcomes. This has been a particular focus at VA, where the agency’s technology shop has paid special attention to diligent surveys and feedback.

“We in the Office of Information & Technology do a lot of survey efforts, and probably lead all of VA in survey efforts,” Trinka said. “We’ve been able to keep this up and keep this pace up, which really allows us to improve how we’re dealing with our employees, how we’re collaborating with our customers, and how we’re improving veteran outcomes and the veteran experience.”

This has resulted in a broader cultural change across the VA, with OIT’s greater leadership role and engagement with VA customers also helping inform and refine their approach to technology implementation.

“Our customers previously considered our IT department as just order takers,” Trinka said. “Now that we’ve done so much customer collaboration, they recognize us as IT experts — this is the problem we see, and how can you help us?”

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