Telework Best Practices Include Modern Infrastructure, Security

Ensuring quality long-term telework capabilities and eligibility must start with the technological foundation.

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Investing in IT infrastructure and nurturing a cyber-forward culture will be some of the keys for government and industry to successfully telework long term, according to industry representatives before a Senate Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs hearing this week.
Despite the federal government’s rapid push toward telework in March, only 22% of the federal workforce was eligible to telework as of 2018, Regulatory Affairs and Federal Management Subcommittee Chair Sen. James Lankford said, noting that COVID-19 has made it clear that agencies need to reevaluate, adjust and modernize their telework policies and infrastructure for an improved future of work.

The subcommittee looked toward industry executives who have various telework expertise, from cybersecurity to modernized infrastructure to enable telework.

Deloitte Principal Sean Morris emphasized four areas that Congress should bolster to ensure an improved long-term ability to telework, during and after the pandemic: continuously invest in IT infrastructure and cybersecurity (particularly the latest cloud-based tools), ensure access to reliable broadband, provide appropriate software and hardware, and nurture a cyber-forward culture.

“Workplaces in supporting IT ecosystems should become more diverse and extended, causing an increase in cyber risks, therefore cybersecurity programs require appropriate layers of technical defense,” Morris said. “Equally important is the nurturing of a cyber culture, where employees understand and counteract ever-evolving threats.”

Energy company Williams Companies invested in technology that enabled its field workers to work remotely before the pandemic, said Senior Vice President and General Counsel Lane Wilson. With the existing infrastructure in place, the company scaled up to enable its entire workforce to work remotely, showcasing how investing in IT modernization early better prepares organizations for crises like the current pandemic.

“Regarding technology deployment, our rapid transition to remote work depended on effective collaboration software,” Wilson said. “We saw the utilization rates of this software increase between 100 and 300% for online chats, web calls and teleconferences. Our transition also relied on employees taking home their laptops and, in some cases, monitors, headphones and other assets. Also worth mentioning, when transitioning large numbers of employees, it is key to have ample IT support as employees acclimate to the new technology and tools.”
While Wilson and Morris both emphasized that cybersecurity is paramount in sustainable long-term telework, Acronis CEO and cybersecurity expert John Zanni added that normalizing a culture around cyber hygiene helps ensure that employees remain secure amid potential vulnerabilities of at-home networks and devices.

“Similar to how the medical field uses vaccines, diagnosis, medications, surgery and research to treat illness, we implemented a cyber hygiene plan underpinned by prevention, detection, response, recovery and post-incident forensics — a framework for digital resilience that I recommend for any organization,” Zanni said.

That framework, Zanni said, involves implementing a zero-trust infrastructure, leveraging next-generation firewalls and segmented networks, enforcing multi-factor authentication and using certificate VPN for access to sensitive information.

Organizations should take a defense-in-depth approach to cybersecurity at the very least, and governmental cybersecurity should agencies provide easy-to-consume cyber hygiene guidance to businesses and other organizations across the country to emphasize the importance of cyber hygiene, Zanni added.

While certain technologies and cybersecurity measures can help support the technical aspects of telework, Zanni and Michael Ly, CEO of online accounting firm Reconciled, said that creating a flexible, understanding and communications-driven work culture is important for successful telework, especially amid the pandemic.

“Most of our employees have school-age children who attend public school in multiple states,” Ly said. “Having children at home requires us to be very flexible with our employees and their schedules so they can take care of their families’ needs, their child’s education, as well as their work responsibilities.”

“We’ve taken a holistic approach to ensure the safety and productivity of our workforce,” Zanni added. “We’ve reimbursed employees for at-home office equipment purchases, dispursed monthly internet stipends, and ensured our health insurance supports telemedicine and mental health services. We also host virtual town halls and social hours to keep our more isolated employees engaged and have flexible schedules for balancing work with at-home family obligations."

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