Data Management Key to Seamless Ops, Law Enforcement Agencies Say

Senior officials from DHS, DOJ and the FBI say smart data practices help them telework more efficiently.

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Tue, 08/04/2020 - 12:03

The COVID-19 pandemic may have shut down swaths of the economy, but law enforcement agencies are obligated to keep operating at full capacity. When those agencies shifted to telework in March, they had to make a series of quick, careful decisions about their IT to make sure they had the data they needed, when they needed it.
Law enforcement agencies listed advanced data analytics (artificial intelligence) and cloud services as key components to keeping operations running smoothly, according to agency leaders at last week's AFCEA Bethesda Law Enforcement and Public Safety Technology Forum.

Department of Homeland Security Deputy CIO Beth Cappello said DHS also used data sharing to help its components and provide important information about the pandemic.

“We have the Homeland Security network, which is our sharing platform that we share with state and local partners,” she said at the forum. “We have seen north of a 400% increase in use of that platform, and it performs seamlessly. People are able to leverage it. The Coast Guard used it to continue to onboard personnel during COVID.”

Due to DHS’ increased data usage, Cappello said the department hopes to hire a chief data officer soon. Currently, Chief Technology Officer Brian Teeple also holds the CDO title — which met the federal Foundations for Evidence-Based Policymaking Act requirement for all agencies to appoint a chief data officer.

If DHS hadn’t managed a seamless transition to the cloud, Cappello added, they might have had a rough time shifting to telework at the beginning of the pandemic.

The cloud enables you to check your email remotely, for example, which turned out to be a pretty big deal for DHS given the prevalence of email in office communication.

“Email is your telephone now,” Cappello said. “Migrating email to the cloud and the additional capabilities that have gone with some of those suites really enabled our mission as we transitioned to a remote work posture. Something as simple as Office automation in the cloud really made the difference in our ability to rapidly switch to a remote posture. If there's a challenge, it's really our legacy systems and how to shift them to the cloud.”

Melinda Rogers, acting CIO for the Department of Justice, said advanced data analytics processes are key to helping employees stay safe as some return to physical offices in its first phase of returning to work.
“Holistically, how many people do we have entering and exiting our various buildings across the NCR (National Capital Region)? What hours are they coming in?” she said at the LEAPS forum. "[With advanced data analytics] we see they're largely coming in a one-hour window. We're congregating around the front door around the same time. Nobody told us to come in at this hour, but we used data [to find this out]. Should we potentially give more guidance on spreading the hours out to continue to practice social distancing?”

More data isn’t always better, especially if a federal agency doesn’t have a way to make sense of it. That’s something Gurvais Grigg, assistant director for FBI's Science & Technology branch, keeps in mind when considering how to make the right data available for FBI employees on the edge and when to declassify data on the edge as FBI employees work remotely.

“It’s about being smart about what data we need to seize,” he said at the forum. “If we conduct a search warrant, it's growing at nonlinear rates the amount of data that's coming in, so we need to be smart about what data to seize and more importantly how to leverage the outcomes of that data. Why does data regarding a washing machine have anything to do with a missing person? Well, was it running at 3 a.m. when the person disappeared?”

Grigg said one challenge facing law enforcement agencies right now is the heterogeneity of the data they’re collecting. Advanced analytics helps solve that problem, especially during a pandemic when employees work remotely and are connected on all sorts of devices outside the physically contained network of a federal office building.

“We have data coming in on social media platforms, mobile devices, off of systems and system logs and security logs — data that users are generating on their devices, all of these are in various stages of data wellness and formatting,” Grigg said. “We have data out there in our environment that needs to make it into our platform and start stitching relationships between that.”

At ICE, the team tweaked its RAVEn innovation lab to help make sense of data in its coronavirus response and making it accessible to ICE employees on the edge.
“How does the innovation lab fit in the space of first responders or emerging trends?,” Executive Associate Director of Homeland Security Investigations Derek Benner said. “As you can imagine during the investigative process, how much data is sitting on our iPhones that never make it into our case management system because it's just not needed? ... Really what it became was a human-centered design with a very agile approach to how we develop these with specific timelines, to create a suite of reusable repeatable tools that could apply to different aspects of the mission.”

For law enforcement agencies to continue meeting mission goals while working remotely during the pandemic, Rogers and Cappello said they need to learn how to manage IT — and data — smartly, and communicate clearly with cloud services providers and IT vendors about law enforcement needs.

“When you have multiple contracts, that can introduce seams/gaps,” Cappello said. “When you talk about a multitude of proprietors, whether a network provider or platform provider, regardless of what it is, you need to have some centralized visibility over what's going on. What we're looking at specifically is tier 1 and 2 operations and providing a more robust tool set. ... It's looking for the seams and gaps to manage this multitude of environments and providers.”