

A Perfect Storm for Telework in Federal Government

Here's an indication of telework's rising star: The General Services Administration has announced its plans to let 50 percent of eligible employees telework at least one day a week by 2010 – more than double the 20 percent stipulated by Section 355 of Public Law 106-346.

Is telework finally taking off? And why now? “The question has never been whether telework is good for federal government,” says John Speicher, industry solutions manager for federal government, Cisco®. A strong business case includes continuity of operations (COOP) support; enhanced collaboration using voice, video, and the Web; a reduced carbon footprint; and a competitive edge in attracting a new generation of younger workers to replace the coming wave of retirees. And if those reasons weren't enough, telework is required by congressional mandate (Section 355), COOP regulations, and Section 508 of the Disabilities Act. “The more interesting question is what has held government agencies back from telework,” Speicher says. Those factors have now been addressed, creating a perfect storm for more widespread telework adoption.

Factor #1: Telework Can Actually Decrease Security Risk

Security concerns about remote access have slowed the introduction of telework in some agencies. “But paradoxically, information security actually improves when agencies provide an authorized telework solution,” says Speicher. The reason: if employees cannot come into the office, they will likely find their own way to access the agency network, as they did during the 2005 New York City transit strike. In that case, well-meaning employees unwittingly infected dozens of servers within two hours. “Having an authorized telework system in place obviates the risk of insecure, ad hoc connections – as well as the expense of remediation,” says Speicher.

Factor #2: Employee Management and Control Are Not the Real Issue

Other agencies have postponed offering a telework option out of concern for how to manage remote employees. “Management is an important issue, but it diverts attention from the fact that the primary purpose of telework is COOP – not telework for its own sake,” says Speicher. “Even those agencies that don't actively promote telework would do well to hold regular telework days so that when the workforce is stuck at home, the agency IT groups and employees will have practice and a good operational understanding of the telework system.”

Factor #3: Last-Mile Solutions Are Available

Until recently, agencies faced a logistical challenge when trying to provision a consistent telework setup and broadband pricing for thousands or tens of thousands of agency employees. Now they can go through the GSA Networkx program to buy a telework managed service offered by Cisco service provider partners.

Factor #4: Broadband Reimbursement Is on the Horizon

The federal government Mass Transit Benefit Program reimburses employees approximately \$100 monthly for public transportation commuting costs, such as Metro. A DSL or cable connection typically costs far less, usually under \$50, and gives federal employees access to voice services, data, and collaborative applications with the same quality, performance, and security they would

have if working from headquarters. The Office of Management and Budget is evaluating home broadband connections as an expensible line item.

Factor #5: Calm Times Provide a Needed Opportunity for Planning and Testing

Instead of viewing today's calm times as diminishing the urgency of telework planning, forward-looking agencies are seizing the opportunity to conduct thorough planning and testing. "To maintain critical government operations during any situation, agencies need to figure out how to work with a displaced workforce," says Speicher. "Planning exercises can include scenarios such as snow shutting down Washington D.C., or 40 percent of the workforce is out because of a flu pandemic. The only response to a pandemic is complete isolation, which makes telework a requirement. Now is the perfect time to get a plan in place."

For assistance with telework planning, contact your Cisco account manager.



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