

CASE STUDY >>>

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Excellence in Telework IT

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Excellence in Telework IT

From Teleworker to Mobile Warrior »»

Leveraging IT to Support the Workforce of Tomorrow

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has a workforce of approximately 120,000 employees and provides the nation with leadership in many areas including food, agriculture, natural resources, and rural development. The Department also has between 20,000 and 30,000 partners in the industry, in contracts, and with state governments and has a presence in nearly every state across the nation. USDA's responsibilities range from supporting customer sites, to managing food processing sites on farms, to patrolling borders to manage animal transport and health. With such a diverse set of functions, USDA recognizes that mobility is the answer for the workforce of tomorrow and is leading the way in streamlining operations and managing a distributed workforce.

USDA has several segments of mobile workers including field workers, teleworkers, and "mobile warriors" – the Department's term for employees conducting work on the go from airports, hotels, and on the road. For more than seven years, USDA has managed a successful telework program and it continues to grow. The Department increased its number of eligible teleworkers from 16,000 in 2010 to more than 58,000 in 2011 and plans to increase telework participation to 40 percent of its eligible workforce by the end of 2012.

Working to Achieve One Goal »»

Streamlining Processes

USDA understands that its 29 separate mission areas and agencies carry out very different functions and can require unique tools and solutions to maintain operations – especially while performing their mission remotely.

"WE UNDERSTAND THE HUGE NEED TO MOVE TOWARD MOBILE COMPUTING. THE DEPARTMENT HAS MADE A STRATEGIC EFFORT TO SUPPORT THE MOBILE WORKFORCE OF TOMORROW AND IDENTIFY THE RIGHT SKILLS, PROCESSES, AND TECHNOLOGIES NEEDED TO SUPPORT THEM."

– Owen Unangst
Director of Enterprise Network Services and former Director of the Office of the Chief Information Officer's Innovations and Emerging Technology Division, USDA

Additionally, USDA continues to face the challenge of consolidating and streamlining operations as much as possible – something its organizations are not accustomed to. As part of this challenge, the Department is working to address a universal definition for telework that can tie to business drivers to further promote expanded mobility and help determine the best way to provide ongoing support for its large demographic of remote, mobile, and field workers. In order to expand a robust and successful telework program, the Department set out to address how its different organizations and categories of employees could work remotely and still follow agency guidelines on network connections, security, printing, and other key functions.

"We want centralized management," said Owen Unangst, Director of Enterprise Network Services, USDA. "We want to eliminate duplicative infrastructures that have duplicative capabilities."



Owen Unangst, Director of Enterprise Network Services and former Director of the Office of the Chief Information Officer's Innovations and Emerging Technology Division, USDA

USDA has identified six basic technology-related initiatives that must be managed throughout each organization: applications, data, networking, security, integrated services, and support. Telework laid the groundwork for the Department to determine how best to manage a heterogeneous set of platforms and devices. USDA also leveraged telework to ensure that the solutions and procedures implemented by the Department are simple, streamlined, secure, and supportable.

How IT Works »»

Developing New Solutions

In an effort to support its diverse employees, USDA was at one point using multiple enterprise service providers for virtual private networks (VPNs). Realizing this to be an inefficient way to operate, the Department decided to solely use Juniper Networks to manage its remote access network. The transition to one provider will be complete in October 2011. Juniper Networks provides a Secure Sockets Layer (SSL)-VPN solution that is compliant with the requirements of the National Institutes of Standards and

Technology and accommodates FIPS 140-2. The combination provides an encrypted connection to the USDA backbone that is also protected with two-factor authentication. In addition to this solution, USDA uses the required HSPD-12 personal identity verification (PIV) cards, using SHA-256 authentication, standardized end-point protection tools, and mobile device management tools. Through over-the-air capabilities, mobile device management tools are used as a security measure to update devices with new patches and wipe devices clean of data if it is stolen or lost.

USDA is also in the process of developing an approved products list (APL). As part of developing the APL and in an effort to remain on the brink of innovative technology, USDA is open to evaluating any new device or tool to determine if it is compatible with the Department's connectivity and security requirements. For example, a team is currently evaluating if the iPad meets all agency device requirements and how it can be used to best serve employees.

The Department offers remote workers several options for securing laptops and other office equipment to ensure they can work effectively without worrying about security issues. USDA has invested in 65,000 government-furnished laptops and is working to ensure that these systems are appropriately distributed to remote workers. It also has a separate inventory of access equipment that can be used in ad hoc or emergency situations. Employees also have the option to use one of the Department's procurement vehicles to secure equipment or use a browser-based system on a personal device.

Within the past eight months, USDA completely revamped its telework program in anticipation of the new requirements set forth in the *Telework Enhancement Act of 2010*. Under the leadership of its new telework program manager, Mika J. Cross, USDA quickly succeeded in meeting the bill's outlined eligibility provisions by June of 2011 and its telework policy was recently updated to include a new, standardized telework agreement form. To accompany the policy, Cross and Unangst

worked together to publish a technical desk guide for telework, which outlines guidelines for using wireless and Wi-Fi connections, managing classified communications remotely, and accessing network e-mail servers remotely.

USDA also enhanced its telework training initiatives and rolled out a new interactive training program through LiveMeeting. Additional plans include a series of short online training modules covering a variety of telework-related subjects, such as teaching managers how to rethink their processes and how to take advantage of telework. Videos will also show users how to set up a Webcam and use internal collaboration tools.

Additionally, a Department-wide, automated telework management system is in the works to consistently track and report telework agreements, types of arrangements, and other important statistics relative to telework eligibility and participation. It also will offer a self-service portal for workers and managers to request, approve, and track telework agreements and enable reporting on eligibility and participation levels.

Results »»

Improving Efficiency and Avoiding Costs

USDA has begun successfully linking return-on-investment figures to its telework program. In addition to aiding the reduction of operating costs, the Department is tying tangible program benefits to reductions in transit subsidy funding, recruitment and retention initiatives, strategies for hiring people with disabilities, and other strategic human capital goals. In fact, USDA's proposal for potential significant savings in transit subsidies each year was submitted to the White House for a Presidential SAVE Award this year. Cross determined USDA would save more than \$1 million each year if just 78 percent of eligible employees who currently receive subsidies opted to telework for more than one day each pay period. Furthermore, it is estimated that – the annual savings for USDA could total more than \$250 million – in real estate, turnover, absenteeism,



Mika J. Cross, Work/ Life and Wellness Program Manager, Department Leader of the Telework Program, USDA

and productivity. Global implications could mean a savings of as much as 100,000 barrels of oil and 18 thousand tons of greenhouse gasses each year.

Management and employees alike have openly and eagerly accepted telework for its proven ability to streamline operations and establish standardized operating procedures. USDA is well on the path to centralize and enhance operations with the adoption of telework and elimination of technology and network redundancies. In the coming year, USDA will focus on increasing telework participation and eligibility levels across the Department with new initiatives like the introduction of a full-time, residential telework option.

The United States Department of Agriculture is working to have 40 percent of all eligible employees teleworking by 2012. To view the complete, updated USDA telework policy visit, <http://tinyurl.com/USDATelework>.

You also can find out more about USDA's Telework Program by sending an email to: Telework@dm.usda.gov.