Pioneer the new hybrid work environment:
5 best practices to transition

Work looked undeniably different more than 18 months ago, when government employees largely sat behind a desk at least eight hours a day and delivered constituent services in person.

But, as we all know, everything has changed—and how, when, and where government employees work may never be the same going forward. Like their private sector counterparts, government agencies are steadily embracing the idea that work isn't just a place. It can be done effectively anywhere, as long as the right tools and processes are in place.

As government organizations slowly return to the office, many plan to implement a hybrid work model permanently, with some workers in the office and others telecommuting from home or at branch sites. However, this will pose challenges for maintaining workplace connections and culture. It may also offer government organizations several advantages around how they manage their resources.

To discuss how government agencies can successfully navigate this new world of hybrid work, Amazon Web Services (AWS) assembled a panel of government IT leaders and public sector experts to share their best practices. Here are their key insights.

Evangelize the value of hybrid work

At the onset of the pandemic, most government agencies had to quickly develop contingency plans to shift to remote work environments. The process wasn't seamless, but it allowed agencies to continue their operations.

With some organizations returning to the office, there's a risk institutional inertia may set in, and agencies may not fully capitalize on the lessons they learned during the pandemic. However, Bill Jones, chief information officer (CIO) and director for the City of Port St. Lucie, Florida, says the mindset has shifted within his municipality. City leadership has embraced remote and hybrid work because employees remained productive, and it helped the city solve two key problems: space constraints and technology adoption within its workforce.

"We always had a challenge to get people to adopt technology. They were put into a sink-or-swim situation and the adoption really went through the roof. A lot of our projects that we were looking at two or three years out have been moved up," Jones says.

Similar to Port St. Lucie, other government organizations need to better understand the unique value hybrid work brings to their organizations. Whether it's reducing their office footprint, increasing worker productivity, or accelerating technology adoption, agencies should continually track the operational benefits they have reaped from hybrid work and regularly socialize and share this information with their leadership teams to nurture support and continued investment for this new operating model.

Understand that one size does not fit all

Organizations will implement hybrid work differently depending on their size. At the state level, enacting this work model comes with certain considerations and challenges.

"We have 35,000-plus employees and 100-plus different agencies," says Tracy Barnes, CIO for the Indiana Office of Technology. "The challenge you face is you end up trying to make general plans for everybody, realizing, acknowledging, and understanding that our teams and our people across agencies operate at very different levels and with very different focuses and are more productive in some fashions and less productive in some fashions," he says.

Barnes says in an organization as large as state government, it's best to have ongoing conversations with leadership and assess which roles are more customer-facing or require more inter-agency collaboration to determine if and how these positions could operate within a hybrid work model.

David Sullivan is chief executive officer (CEO) of Elizabeth Rivers Crossing, a company that handles large infrastructure projects in Virginia's South Hampton Road region. He says it's also important for leaders to manage the cultural changes, and inherent tensions, that may come with some employees working remotely and other employees working in person due to the nature of their jobs. Managers must continuously communicate and check in with their teams, cultivate an understanding that where someone works doesn't necessarily drive their performance, and use their organization's overarching goals and broader mission as their North Star.

"After doing this for almost a year and a half, I can say the good performers when they were in the office are the good performers working from home. The marginal performers in the office, they're the marginal performers working from home," Sullivan says. "That is not what drives performance.

It's the people, their commitment, and their abilities that drive performance."

Build resilience with the cloud

Agencies will also need enabling tools to successfully implement a hybrid work model.

Sullivan says his organization was well-positioned before the pandemic because it had transitioned many of its legacy systems and applications to the Amazon Web Services (AWS) Cloud in 2018. This helped the company increase its resilience and reduce its data center costs. It also gave Elizabeth River Crossings a foundation it could build on to modernize other parts of its operations.

During the pandemic, the company moved from a 40-seat, in-person call center and stood up a virtual contact center. They used Amazon Connect, an omnichannel cloud call center solution that integrates AI-driven virtual chatbots, sentiment analysis, interactive voice response, and unified customer profiles to deliver real-time and personalized customer experiences.

Though government agencies have made cloud investments over the last 18 months, they need to carefully assess what solutions will serve them well over the medium and long-term based on their specific operational needs as workers return to the office. For some agencies, this may mean adding virtual chatbots to their website to answer routine questions and automate parts of their staff's day-to-day work. It may mean providing mobile hotspot devices for employees who live in rural areas with limited connectivity, offering self-service tools to streamline application intake for business permits and social service programs, or implementing digital collaboration and endpoint management platforms to improve information-sharing and increased IT visibility.

Whatever approach an agency decides to take, it's clear legacy systems and applications will likely make it more difficult for them to build resilient, fully optimized hybrid work environments. Therefore, cloud modernization must be an integral part of their go-forward strategy.

Use hybrid work to increase your organization's competitiveness

Craig Orgeron, an executive government advisor at AWS, says the shift to remote and hybrid work could give agencies an invaluable opportunity to bring more talent into the public sector and retain existing talent.

"There are data points that show over half of employees say work flexibility is really impactful for staying or leaving an organization. This [pandemic] experiment created, if not an expectation, an experience that impacts how people feel about work," Orgeron says. "This experiment that we did with COVID, in terms of the workforce, has really pushed the conversation to a different place. Maybe there are really good outcomes in the public sector as a result of this."

Barnes echoes this point, saying government agencies must adapt or risk losing talent.

"That's what we, in our executive level seats, have to acknowledge, realize, and try to get the folks above us to accept, is that the market is now defining our culture," he says. "If we don't find a way to adapt and adopt as a government agency or entity, we're going to fail."

Barnes adds that along with flexibility, tying work back to an agency's mission and the outcomes it delivers may incentivize workers to stay in the public sector or attract those who want to do meaningful, impactful work.

"That's the core of the message we need to keep focusing on and trying to sell," he says.

Be intentional and data driven

As governments try to pioneer a new hybrid work environment, they will need to be more strategic, intentional, and forward-looking than ever before. This will require them to use data to inform their workplace design and to tie their operating model back to the desired constituent experience they want to achieve.

Orgeron says the concept of good government is increasingly synonymous with digital government, so governments will need to focus on several essential digital capabilities as they transition to a post-pandemic world. This includes implementing contactless services and intelligent automated systems; establishing device persistence and data unification to create unified employee and constituent profiles across government; and instituting robust endpoint, device, and network security to reduce their exposure. Working with cloud providers who offer solutions with comprehensive built-in security and employing a shared responsibility model are two approaches that can help agencies strengthen their security posture while increasing their agility and resilience.

Orgeron says that last year there wasn't as much intentionality in how governments implemented remote and hybrid work models. Admittedly, this wasn't always possible considering how quickly agencies had to adapt. However, these organizations now have an opportunity to fine-tune their operations and make strategic investments that could finally bring to fruition the dream of digital government.

"Just as the internet launched a new era digitally, one could argue that COVID has triggered a new work era," Orgeron says. "It's a chance to intentionally rethink who we are, how we work, where we work, and when we work. If we do that, we could end up with a big win-win for the many folks who work in the public sector, the agencies, and the citizens they serve."

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