

Adjusting to the New Workplace Reality

Highlights from the "Returning to the Workplace: Using IT for Modern Hybrid Work Environments" Webinar

On April 15, 2021 ServiceNow and The Advanced Technology Academic Research Center (ATARC) held a joint webinar on the topic of "Returning to the Workplace: Using IT for Modern Hybrid Work Environments" featuring a panel of senior leaders from across the federal government: **Sherry Van Sloun**, Assistant Director of National Intelligence for Human Capital, Office of the Director of National Intelligence (DNI), **Alexander Rowan**, Resources & Systems Division Director of FIMA's Fund Management Directorate, **Martin Stanley**, Branch Chief, Strategic Technology Office of the Chief Technology Officer, Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), **Clarence Baker Jr.**, Human Capital/Program Management Professional, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and **Trent Frazier**, Executive Director for Campaigns and Academic Engagement, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, CISA.

The panel was moderated by **Jonathan Alboum**, Federal Chief Technology Officer, Principal Digital Strategist at ServiceNow, who himself has held a variety of senior executive positions in the federal government, including serving as the Chief Information Officer for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Panel participants discussed the way that the coronavirus pandemic forced them to rethink how best to serve their employees and the public at large, the internal challenges federal agencies have to overcome, and the opportunity to deliver services in a more inclusive and efficient way in the future.

Webinar attendees represented a wide variety of business and technology roles in both the public and private sectors and played an active role in the discussion by asking questions of panel participants and taking part in a series of polls.

The Shift to Remote Work

Webinar Audience Poll: On a scale from 1-5, how satisfied have you been with your agency's ability to shift to a remote workforce?



By and large, webinar attendees were positive about the ability of their agencies to shift to a remote workforce in

response to the coronavirus pandemic, with 70% of attendees reporting that they were "very" or "extremely" satisfied.

Panel participants concurred, with several pointing to how comfortable their workforces are with the new remote or hybrid work environment. Stanley spoke about how he'd witnessed a change from the beginning of the pandemic, when colleagues were contacting him in a panic to ask about VPN capacity and other issues, to today, when employees are so comfortable working remotely that many are rethinking whether they want to return to the office at all. Van Sloun saw similar trends from her position within the intelligence community, saying that "as we gradually start to bring folks back in there's going to be some reluctance because many have been so successful in doing their work remotely."

Rowan provided a slightly different perspective by noting that FEMA employees had long been used to working remotely, being prepared to go into the field at a moment's notice to work directly in communities impacted by natural disaster.

"70% of everything we do can be done remotely."

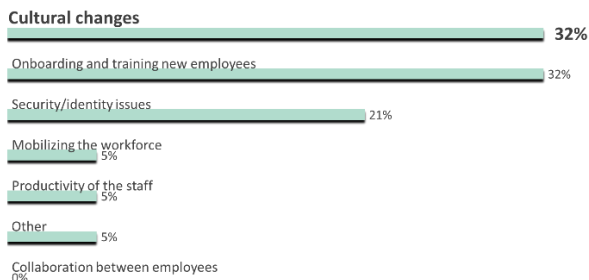
Clarence Baker Jr., HHS

[M-21-15](#), the January 24 memorandum from the Biden administration outlining workplace protection requirements in federal buildings, including the wearing of masks and social distancing, was clearly also top of mind for panel participants. To illustrate, Rowan spoke to the importance of showing empathy when communicating with employees and how he assured his team that there would be no sudden changes in working conditions. Noting that there was always a risk for people to "disappear" in a virtual environment, Rowan made sure to regularly check in on his team and emphasize that their safety was the number one priority. This included assurances that his team would not be required to return to the office until he could ensure the environment was safe for them to do so in line with M-21-15 guidelines.

Overcoming Cultural Barriers

When asked about the greatest challenges to transitioning to a remote or hybrid work environment webinar participants pointed to cultural issues as among the most salient, a sentiment that was echoed by panel attendees.

Webinar Audience Poll: While transitioning to a remote workforce, what was the most challenging thing your agency had to overcome?



Frazier observed that for many employees their physical workplace is a major part of their identity as employees and for managers there can be a tendency to fear that if people are not physically in the office work will not get done. But the reality is that work is getting done and public sector employees from across the federal government have been proving that work can be done in a remote or hybrid environment since early 2020. In fact, several panel participants made the case that accommodating remote and hybrid work environments would be critical to recruiting and retaining the workforce necessary to fulfill agency objectives.

“Work is not a place we go but a thing we do.”

Trent Frazier, CISA

Stanley explained that in recent months he and his colleagues at CISA had gone through all employee positions to determine whether or not they truly needed to be physically based in the office and allow for more flexible working arrangements where possible. The result has been to allow many people to move outside of the Capital Beltway and permanently work remotely should they wish to do so.

Van Sloun added that she and her colleagues in the intelligence community were trying to go through a similar process for both full-time employees and contractors. She made the case that failure to offer flexible work arrangements would make agencies less desirable places to work not only by comparison to the private sector but by comparison to more flexible agencies as well. In her words, “telework is going to be a major factor in the way we recruit and retain our workforce” and though enabling remote and hybrid work environments is more challenging in the intelligence field, it is an effort well worth making.

Charting A Path Forward

Perhaps most importantly, panel participants were united in their determination to use the pandemic as an opportunity for their agencies to improve. Frazier noted that the

pandemic forced CISA to rethink how it provides services to citizens and communities. For example, instead of relying solely on in-person instructor-led training to deliver information, CISA is increasingly evaluating remote training and on-demand self-paced training delivered through an online learning management system.

Rowan provided a similar example with regard to the use of physical, “wet,” signatures at FEMA. Where FEMA has historically required wet signatures for all kinds of documents, the agency is now exploring ways to substitute digital “e-signatures” instead. These kinds of changes are very much in line with the spirit of the [21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act](#), which aims to meet increased citizen expectations by requiring federal agencies to provide more efficient digital experiences.

The opportunities for affecting positive change go beyond technology and processes. Van Sloun spoke to the value of diversity to DNI’s mission and made the case for developing empathy as a key theme in leadership training. In a similar vein, Frazier argued that workplaces have historically been dominated by extroverts and encouraged the audience to rethink how communication occurs in the workplace and better recognize the value that introverts bring to the table. He concluded by sharing his hope that federal agencies will use the pandemic as an opportunity to truly evolve and modernize the way they deliver services to employees and the communities which they serve.

“At DNI diversity is at the core of our mission. If we don’t understand the values of different diverse groups and the disparate impact of the pandemic across communities, we’re not going to be able to retain the workforce we need to meet our mission objectives.”

Sherry Van Sloun, DNI

How ServiceNow Can Help

ServiceNow works with customers from across the federal landscape, like the [U.S. Department of Energy](#), to improve service delivery, drive efficiency, and create a safe workplace environment in line with federal guidelines. ServiceNow’s [Safe Workplace Suite](#) assists with contact tracing, helps manage PPE inventory, conducts workforce assessments, and more.

To learn more, [visit us](#) to browse our demo library, access a free developer instance, or request a live demo.