



A CENTER FOR DIGITAL GOVERNMENT ISSUE BRIEF | T-MOBILE FOR GOVERNMENT

Modernizing the Public Sector Workforce

What it will take to embrace
a more wireless future

The coming shift to high-bandwidth wireless networks will give public sector workers agility and convenience that was unimaginable a few years ago.

For example, a recent office building evacuation in Los Angeles shows how the transition to mobile work is gaining ground in the public sector. Ted Ross, chief information officer for Los Angeles and general manager of the city's Information Technology Agency, shares an eyewitness account:

"We're in a large government building, with a thousand-plus employees making their way down the stairwell," Ross recalls. When his work group reconvened in their assigned location across the street, Ross was met with a remarkable surprise. "I noticed three of my staff were still holding a conference call," he says. A portable Bluetooth speaker designed for conference calls (and reliable cellphone connections) kept everybody talking.

"They walked down 14 flights of stairs, continuing the call and then finishing it — all during a building evacuation," Ross says.

Fortunately, it was a false alarm. But the event showed how wireless networks are transforming the work of government employees. The trend is sure to pick up speed with the expansion of 5G wireless networks.



Why the workplace is going wireless

Years before the pandemic forced a global shift to remote work, Los Angeles IT leaders were gearing up to replace the city's wired office telephone network. "We had a choice," Ross says. "Should we spend \$30 million or more replacing desk phones with voice-over-IP phones, or should we start replacing them with smartphones which is a generational leap ahead?"

L.A. chose the future — smartphones and wireless connectivity. City workers and the people they serve expect government services to be delivered over mobile devices. A mobile-focused phone system helps the city meet these expectations.

Smartphones free city staff to get their work done anytime, from virtually anywhere. IT leaders can custom-configure smartphones, tablets and other devices to give workers exactly what they need for their jobs, unshackling them from office desks.

New hires also appreciate the move. "I've had multiple staff who were pleasantly surprised to be handed a smartphone instead of a desk phone on their first day of work," Ross says. In the years to come, younger staff will enter the workforce habituated to the latest mobile technologies.

Better wireless tech helps managers recruit qualified candidates, motivates workers to succeed and discourages

talent from bolting for the private sector. Los Angeles leaders developed a program specifically to meet the digital needs and expectations of their staff. It's already paying dividends.

"We've had people turn down job opportunities at other places because of our progressive views on the tools and capabilities we give our employees," Ross says.

Los Angeles is entering public-private partnerships to smooth the transition to a wireless workplace. T-Mobile for Government is one of its key partners. "Our philosophy is allowing people to not only communicate by voice anywhere they need to, but to also let them take advantage of apps and communication tools," Ross says. "T-Mobile loved that vision, so they went all-in with us."

L.A. also partnered with Google, whose Workspace platform provides advanced videoconferencing tools. Public-private partnerships are complicated affairs that require strong alignment from both sides. Ross's advice: Make sure partners share your vision for technologies and the people who will depend on them.

How mobile technology will affect employment

The growth of 5G connectivity is poised to kick the mobile workforce transition into overdrive. Some trends affecting public sector employment:

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Wi-Fi challenges start to recede.

As 5G becomes more common, the role of Wi-Fi will shift. Public sector IT teams will likely spend less time managing and securing Wi-Fi connections. Workers will enjoy faster, safer wireless connectivity because they're not relying on unsecured public Wi-Fi networks. This brings more flexibility and enables high-bandwidth, low-latency applications like large-group teleconferencing.

Work becomes fully mobile.

More laptops and tablets will include chipsets for 5G cellular connections. More employees will have high-speed connections anywhere within the range of a 5G tower. Manufacturers are also adding chips that mute background noises and screens that are visible in full sunlight.

AI/ML capabilities ramp up.

Video data streams, sensor networks and other rapidly evolving applications will enable a new generation of artificial intelligence and machine learning applications. Managers will have predictive analytics capabilities and staff will be able to automate manual tasks, making operations more efficient and economical.

"It's exciting when you look at all of this coming together, because now people might truly be able to work where they are and when they can," says David M. Bezzant, vice president for public sector with T-Mobile USA.

How to create a wireless workforce

Ross recalls that converting Los Angeles workers from desk phones to smartphones didn't inspire people to throw a parade in his honor. "It's a significant change in culture and practice," he cautions. People must be prepared for the change and trained to adopt new workflows.

"The first, most important thing is to make the business case" to decision-makers and staffers directly affected by the change, he says. Start by analyzing the ROI of going mobile. For instance, agency staff may lose hours of productivity driving to far-flung locations, adding expensive wear and tear to government-owned vehicles.

You could save enough in labor and transportation costs to justify the investment in mobile technology. "Looking at the overall ROI is critical," Bezzant says.

The best case for investing in a mobile workforce is the ability to serve the public during a crisis. "Whether we're talking about a pandemic, fire, flood or earthquake, mobility gives us flexibility," Ross says. "You cannot underestimate how important that is in a constantly changing world."

Be ready for skeptics. You may get questions like, "If we replace a desk phone with a smartphone, how do we know someone's at their desk working?"

Of course, sitting at a desk doesn't always equate to productivity. When shifting to wireless connectivity, leaders must reevaluate how to manage people and their workloads.

Understand that a key part of training your staff is creating a new culture that encourages the adoption of mobile and modern technology.

"As a CIO, I find that over half of my conversations are about culture, not technology," Ross says.

Preparation is key to riding the wireless wave

Agencies that anticipate what's coming stand the best chance of adapting successfully to the wireless workplace. Finding strong private sector partners will be essential.

Ultimately, agencies need to lay the groundwork for a mobile future, making savvy technology decisions based on rigorous cost-benefit analyses. Buying legacy technologies may be worthwhile if you're getting new tools, adding functionality or improving business outcomes. But if old tech brings no new benefits, it's time to retire it.

"Desk phones have been mostly the same for decades. My organization was unwilling to spend \$30 million to gain no new features or benefits," Ross concludes. "Our organization was willing to make the leap, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, that decision paid huge dividends in a flexible government workforce when Angelenos needed us most."

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This piece was written and produced by the Center for Digital Government Content Studio, with information and input from T-Mobile.



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