

Trend 4

# Anywhere, Everywhere:

Integrating your virtual workplace

**FEDERAL TECHNOLOGY VISION 2021**

Accenture Federal Services

The Accenture logo, featuring a stylized 'A' icon above the word 'accenture' in a lowercase, sans-serif font.

When the pandemic hit in spring of 2020, billions of people around the world changed behavior virtually overnight. Businesses and government agencies alike sent their people to work from home and doubled down on technology solutions to keep them productive. A vast majority of federal executives—79 percent—surveyed by Accenture in early 2021 agreed that their organization’s employees had just faced the largest and fastest human behavioral change in history due to COVID-19.





Many organizations approached these changes as short-term solutions to a temporary disruption. But it is increasingly clear that, post-pandemic, no one is going back to work as they remember it. Instead, we are all moving into a new future where work can be done from anywhere.

“Because we’ve got everything connected, because we’ve got this workforce that can now work from wherever they are, whenever they want, it’s changed the paradigm on how we’re going to do work,” Air Force Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Stephen Wilson remarked recently.<sup>1</sup>

Forward-looking agencies will seize this future to address persistent challenges and take advantage of the many new opportunities that today’s virtual workplace paradigm affords. In other words, it is time to transform remote work from an accommodation to an advantage by rethinking what the organization looks like and what it can achieve with a virtualized workforce model.

## How government agencies can prepare for today's "bring your own environment" world

In the early days of the "bring your own device" (BYOD) movement, employers had to fashion new, flexible policies and technology solutions to accommodate a wide spectrum of devices while also mitigating the many information security risks that accompanied this new paradigm. This gave employees a chance to be more productive and have a better work experience. Now we've moved beyond BYOD and into BYOE: Employees are bringing *entire environments* to work.

They may be working on a company laptop, but that laptop is connected to a personal home network that also hosts smart speakers, security cameras, gaming consoles, and more—the average U.S. household already averages 10 connected devices.<sup>2</sup> The laptop itself is sitting on the kitchen island between the day's mail and the kids' homework. And in the middle of all that is the employee—leaning heavily on technology to meet the demands of her job while surrounded by the demands of her life.

Moreover, remote work environments aren't limited to the home. Employees in the post-pandemic era

will most likely be working in multiple locations throughout the work week: at home, the office, the airport, an enterprise partners' offices, a field location, or somewhere else. For workers needing to be onsite to support classified programs, there's even a question of how can they bifurcate their work lives so some projects can be completed remotely.

The reality is that BYOE is here to stay. Employees have spent a year experiencing the flexibility and benefits of working from home and elsewhere; many will be reluctant to return to offices. Likewise, many agencies have discovered that large-scale remote work can reduce energy, facility, and commute costs and even boost employee productivity. For some, that will mean going back to the office; for some it will mean going 100 percent remote; and still others will want a mix.

Leading organizations were already moving toward workforce decentralization before the pandemic, eyeing benefits like the ability to recruit from non-traditional locations or offering their people more flexibility and freedom. The demonstrated ability

of cloud-based platforms and collaboration tools to fully support remote workers—and the resulting productivity improvements—will only accelerate this trend.

Today's BYOE paradigm will certainly outlast the pandemic, which means organizational leaders will need to reassess the size and purposes of the physical office. In the future, successful organizations will be the ones who resisted the urge to race everyone back to the office in favor of rethinking their workforce model.

**87%** of federal executives (versus 81% of executives globally) agree that leading organizations in their industry will start shifting from a Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) to Bring Your Own Environment (BYOE) workforce approach.

## The federal implications of today's BYOE paradigm

Federal agencies have been experimenting with remote work for decades, but until the pandemic occurred, only a few agencies, including the U.S. Patent & Trademark Organization (USPTO), NASA, the General Services Administration (GSA), the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and the National Science Foundation (NSF), had embraced it on a large scale. Prior to the shutdown, only 55 percent of the 907,813 telework-eligible federal employees were working remotely to any extent, underscoring potential obstacles in doing so.<sup>3</sup>

So what have we learned so far, having more than a year of wide-scale remote work under our belt? And what are the opportunities for government that lie ahead as leaders weigh their next steps?

- **Big, rapid change is doable.** Agencies and their employees discovered they are nimbler than they might have thought. Agencies had to loosen restrictions on where employees can work, equip them with the tools to do so, support them both

professionally and personally, and then figure out how to achieve their mission objectives virtually—all in short order.

- **It's time to re-imagine traditional work structures.** It turns out many meetings simply aren't that necessary (imagine that!). What's more, that standard eight-hour shift may not be optimal for everyone and sitting at a desk doesn't always translate into productivity. In fact, many federal leaders found that moving to a remote work model yielded productivity levels that were the same or better than before the pandemic.<sup>4</sup>
- **Long-term success requires stakeholder engagement.** Agency managers will need to engage their many stakeholders, including federal unions, to re-calibrate workplace policies and practices, affecting everything from performance appraisals and job descriptions to interoffice communications and recruiting.



- **BYOE augurs big changes for recruitment.**

As more and more positions become remote-enabled, recruiting efforts can be freed up to expand from a local focus to a more national focus, dramatically widening the available labor pool for many positions.

- **Workplace and work time are changing.**

It's not just the *workplace* that's become more fluid with BYOE—it's also the *workday* itself. This means agencies will need to think about how to adjust workplace policies and protocols to fit today's more fluid schedules.

- **Policies need to keep pace.** Existing policies and work rules may unnecessarily inhibit virtual work. For example, many experts contend that too much government information is overclassified; a critical implication of this, besides cost, is the increased difficulty in working virtually with classified information. Also, today's BYOE paradigm is occurring in tandem with another momentous workplace trend changing the nature of federal work:

the increasing adoption of artificial intelligence, machine learning, and automation technologies. Amid these transformations, it behooves agency managers to review federal job descriptions to ensure they have the flexibility needed to accommodate current and future changes in how work gets done.

- **More IT modernization is needed.** The technology piece of BYOE needs further refinements to be successful over the long haul. Virtual private networks, telework tools, and training, for example, will need to be re-assessed and upgraded to ensure virtual work is done securely, fluently, seamlessly across organizational boundaries, and with fairness and equity in mind for all employees wherever they work. Paper-based processes will need to be digitized and many IT services and capabilities should be made available as a self-service. Finally, interoperability is key so that collaboration tools can connect federal employees with their inter-agency, intra-agency, and even non-federal colleagues and stakeholders.

- **Employees need more technical training.**

Whether it's about having a working fluency with the latest collaboration tools or knowing how to mitigate security risks, employees will have continuing needs for upskilling.

As agency leaders define what their workplaces will look like in the post-pandemic era, it is clear there are many factors they will need to weigh.

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## The stakes for getting it right

As the commercial world moves deliberately into this new era of remote work, government agencies will need to keep pace—not only so they can deliver on their missions, but also so they can recruit and retain the new talent they will need in the future. Workplace flexibility is increasingly an expectation across the job market and federal agencies will need to get this right as they compete to attract and retain talent in the future.

This was clearly one of the driving forces behind the release in early 2021 of a “Future of Work” concept paper by the Army’s Combat Capabilities Development Command (DEVCOM), which encourages employees to work where and when they are most productive.<sup>5</sup> “We know people are most productive when they’re happy with their life, and for a lot of people that’s location based, that’s family based, that’s geography based,” said John Willison, deputy to the commanding general of DEVCOM. “So in a job announcement, I can say, ‘Here’s the expectation: every so often, you’re going to have to come in and work with the team.’ And that will be different for different positions, but we now open up our ability to attract and recruit talent to so many different sources

that we haven’t been able to have before, because we stipulated a duty location.”<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) introduced remote work options prior to the pandemic to improve retention and protect the substantial training investments it makes in its workforce. In doing so, the SEC found that the more days an employee teleworked, the less likely he or she was to consider leaving the agency within the next year.<sup>7</sup>

Not surprisingly, agencies that offer employees greater flexibility in their day-to-day work environments also typically enjoy greater employee satisfaction and loyalty, as shown in the annual *Best Places to Work in Government* surveys. “By looking at teleworkers within the *Best Places to Work* framework, managers can see how telework positively influences overall job satisfaction,” wrote the Partnership for Public Service. “Just having that option available, regardless of whether it is actually used, can have a positive impact on employee satisfaction, and ultimately on job performance.”<sup>8</sup>

When executed well, remote work environments can deliver many other benefits as well. Lower energy and real estate costs, fewer employee sick days, reduced commuting for employees, greater resiliency and continuity of operations—all of these are associated with more flexible work environments.

Going forward, the strongest and most resilient organizations will be physically distributed, creatively connected, empowered by technology, and able to innovate from anywhere. While the specific balance will vary by agency and employee, the BYOE model drives real value when smartly deployed.

**87%** of federal executives believe the remote workforce opens up the market for difficult to find talent and expands the competition for talent among organizations.

Explore further

# Fortify:

## From patchwork solutions to permanent strategy

The pandemic kicked off fresh new waves of technology investment for many agencies so they could accommodate remote work on a greater scale. In our survey of federal executives, sizable percentages said their organizations invested in digital collaboration tools (47 percent) and cloud-enabled tools and technologies (41 percent) to support their remote workforces during COVID-19. Other investments targeted productivity management tools, remote monitoring technologies, home networking equipment, training, and more.





As agency leaders look to improve upon their BYOE capabilities further, there are four areas of focus that can help: ensuring collaboration tools work well together; upskilling employees where needed; committing to a satisfying employee experience; and getting security right.

- **Collaboration tools.** The tools used by one organization may not interoperate with those of another organization, even within the same agency. Or they may interoperate, but they produce uneven experiences, leading to disparities. “One of the things we have to prepare for is the democratization of access,” said Vaughn Noga, chief information officer at the Environmental Protection Agency. “One of the things that we’re really focused on is making sure that we don’t have a disparity of experience.”<sup>9</sup> To address this, the EPA is placing greater focus on fine-tuning its collaboration technologies—updating videoconferencing equipment, beefing up network bandwidth, and emphasizing more training around the technology—so everyone has

the same experience, whether working from home or not. Also, there are promising new advances in collaboration tools that agency managers may consider. For example, extended reality platforms can now offer immersive experiences that transport remote workers to virtual environments where they can interact with systems and coworkers in real-time.

- **Upskilling.** As Noga from the EPA said, “It’s not always the IT or the technology. It’s how you train and support folks who may not be IT folks to use this technology.” He added that EPA “spent a lot of time on training to make sure people understand on their terms.”<sup>10</sup> As new technologies enter the workplace, it is critical that employees are prepared to benefit from them. Without that training piece, troubling misalignments can emerge between employees and their tools.
- **Employee experience.** When workers were in the office, it was easier to spot problems with the employee experience. With BYOE as the new future, employee experience is more important than ever,

but it is obscured behind miles of distance, shifted schedules, and potentially disparate time zones. Analytics tools can be helpful here, but so can simply being more proactive in engaging your staff, talking to them about what they are experiencing, and involving them in the solutioning process.

- **Security.** Agencies need to accept that, in many cases, their employees’ environments are a permanent part of their own enterprise attack surface and adjust accordingly. Security was a pain point for enterprises long before the company attack surface expanded to include employees’ homes and their connected TVs, speakers, smart home devices, and security cameras. This increased uncertainty is likely to render traditional “moats and castles” perimeter-based security strategies unsustainable. Rather, agencies will want to accelerate their move to zero trust architectures interlaced with automation and intelligent tools to identify potential bad actors hiding in the everyday back and forth.

The payoff is worth the investment. As the Army DEVCOM states in its “Future of Work” concept document: “To maximize our potential and impact, our Command must embrace a future of work environment that is different from the past.” By embracing greater flexibility in *where* and *when* work gets done, the command argues it can “shift from reactively filling vacancies to proactively building the talent needed to execute the DEVCOM mission now and in the future.”<sup>11</sup> Agency leaders already understand their greatest assets are their people—taking these steps and making these investments will help ensure they attract and keep the people they need to be successful in the future.



# Extend:

## New workspace, new opportunities

A few pace-setting agencies were trailblazers in BYOE well before the pandemic. A case in point is the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO), which demonstrated that significant benefits are possible when organizations thoughtfully push the boundaries of remote work. The agency grew its program over two decades, and by 2019, more than 11,000 employees were teleworking weekly, with more than 7,000 employees relinquishing USPTO workspace to work from home four to five days per week.<sup>12</sup>





By greatly expanding the scale of its remote work program, USPTO was able to completely re-imagine the utility of its office building infrastructure and significantly shrink its real estate footprint. It moved to a hoteling model, called the Patent Hoteling Program, for much of its office space and reaped impressive gains in response. The agency claimed in a 2020 report that it avoids more than \$50 million in costs annually by not having to provide office space to employees due to its full-time telework programs.<sup>13</sup>

The benefits of more flexible work were not just in terms of real estate savings. When USPTO began offering patent examiners not just a work-from-home (WFH) option but also a more expansive, work-from-anywhere (WFA) option, in which employees could have the geographic freedom to live wherever they wish, it led to a 4.4 percent increase in productivity.<sup>14</sup>

Other agencies have followed suit. The General Services Administration similarly expanded its remote work program, allowing it to re-imagine its real estate needs and install a hoteling program at its renovated headquarters. This helped reduce real estate and

office costs by \$24.6 million. Telework helped the Department of Justice save more than \$5.5 million in office space, improved productivity, lower absenteeism, lower commuting costs, employee attrition, and more. Likewise, the Homeland Security Department saved about \$2.3 million in real estate and desk sharing.<sup>15</sup>

The ramifications of this are truly staggering. Imagine for example, how this might benefit the Defense Department, which not only has enormous real estate holdings, but also spends billions of dollars annually moving personnel from one base to another. “I would see us not going back to some of the models, right?” said Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower, Personnel, and Services Lt. Gen. Brian Kelly. “Not just telework in the location where you live, but imagine us now being able to hire somebody in Arizona who works in the Pentagon, and then never leaving Arizona—maybe occasionally coming TDY [temporary duty travel] to the Pentagon, but staying in their home. [And] for certain staff jobs, our military members, not PCSing [permanent change of station] because they’re able to effectively telework.”<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, the benefits of BYOE are vast. In the long run, embracing BYOE isn’t just about accommodating a benefit your people have gotten used to, or even about increasing resilience against future disruptions. It’s an opportunity to reimagine what you do and what you can offer to the employees who help you deliver it. The benefits are vast: true national access to talent; having a workforce that’s constantly “on” by virtue of coverage across time zones; even delivering on sustainability goals by right-sizing office spaces and cutting down on polluting, energy-consuming employee commutes.

# Reinvent:

## Embrace the new work culture

There is a big difference between the BYOD movement that swept across many federal agencies a decade ago and today's shift to BYOE. With BYOD, the challenges were primarily limited to tech functionality and security. When we use the word "environment," however, we are talking about people's lives. A person's environment is more than just devices and WiFi networks. It's kids, pets, the construction happening next door, the sick relatives they're supporting, their stress levels—the humanity of the equation. None of these challenges are new for any of us as people, but "going to work" used to provide some separation that kept them largely out of the employer's purview. No more.



The enterprise must accept that the employee environment is now part of the “workplace,” and accommodate for people’s needs just as they would for people’s technical requirements. This will be a large, slow-to-emerge cultural shift, but there are some tips to help you find your footing:

- **Recognize that BYOE is a work in progress.** Commit yourself to continued improvement. We see this, for example, in the way the EPA is upgrading its tools and training to ensure employees are getting a similar level of end user experience.
- **Be careful about divides emerging in your workforce.** In government, there will always be a sizable portion of the workforce that comes to the office each morning. Especially at national security agencies, many employees simply cannot work from home because the classified information they work with is only accessible in secure facilities. Still other employees feel more productive in an office setting and enjoy the in-person camaraderie that offices offer. Workers in different roles will benefit from the best work environment for their needs, but without careful implementation it could lead

to a divided workforce where in-office and remote workers struggle to collaborate and become demoralized or feel unsupported.

- **Tend to the disparities.** Take steps to ensure a level playing field for all employees, regardless of where they work. For example, the Government Accountability Office encourages agencies to hold teleworkers and non-teleworkers to the same performance standards. Training programs can help ensure employees and managers are on the same page. And agencies should ensure access and security challenges in their technology offerings are well addressed.<sup>17</sup>
- **Train your managers how to properly manage distributed teams.** They will need to learn how to manage employees based on their results and outcomes, and less on the processes used to produce that work. Setting and measuring goals in distributed teams is different. They will have to trust their employees to do the right thing and make sure their team has the support, information, training, and tools they need to get it done. They will have to learn how to communicate effectively and be comfortable with an indirect line of sight into what

employees are doing in their adapted and adopted work environments.

- **Listen to your employees and be proactive in addressing their concerns.** Leaders and managers will need to ‘lean in’ to their teams to make this work. They will need to handle conflict faster and more directly, so it doesn’t fester out of sight. And they will need to spend a different type of quality time with their teams and team members listening deeply and asking appropriate probing questions when seeking to understand a situation or concern. When your workforce is distributed geographically, you can’t simply wait for their problems to show up at your doorstep—it may be too late by then. Engage your people and make two-way communications a priority.

Optimizing your organization for a BYOE strategy is a moving target and best practices are still evolving. But one thing is certain: Waiting to act isn’t an option. To create an organization that attracts the best talent and keeps employees engaged, enterprises will need to constantly experiment with new solutions, pursuing and supporting cultural changes like these across the organization.



# Decision points

**Fortify:** How is your agency making remote work sustainable, seamless, and secure?

- Identify where you made rapid digital transformations and prioritize addressing outstanding security concerns. Cyberattacks are on the rise and the enterprise's attack surface is wider than ever. Commit the necessary resources to security teams to minimize risk to both the business and employee.
- Re-evaluate technology strategy to ensure benefits of remote work are being maximized. Examine VPN needs and access requirements, ensure employees are trained to use the tools they have, and create a pipeline for employees to recommend new collaborative solutions to the organization.

**Extend:** How are your people responding to remote work?

- Open the lines of communication with your employees to explore the future of work. What is working for some teams or individuals may not be the same for others. Engage your people to understand what benefits (or challenges) they are facing with remote work, share best practices, and solicit their involvement as you develop strategies and solutions for moving forward.
- Partner with your workforce to understand the new demands they face as their home becomes their office. Uncover accommodations the enterprise can make as the employee's environment—including their personal life—becomes part of the "workplace" and requires different accommodations.
- You are performing a massive workforce experiment—evaluate how it is going. Invest in workplace analytics tools and develop a set of KPIs to build a deeper understanding of how employees are responding to remote work.

**Reinvent:** How are you thinking about the purpose of place moving forward?

- Where possible, reimagine how your physical space is utilized. Plan for optimizing offices to account for a growing remote contingent, and how the enterprise can transform these spaces. Explore creating extended reality (XR) capabilities and environments that will foster immersive digital collaboration.
- Revise recruiting and talent strategies to take advantage of talent pools outside your typical geographic markets. For example, think about your recruiting process: resume intake; basic requirements; who candidates interview with (and how). These, and more, will need to be reworked to connect with a wider network.
- Emphasize the culture. Ensure that the informal advantages of workplaces are virtualized as well. Team-building efforts and "water cooler" conversations need to find their digital home as the enterprise builds toward a future with a mix of in-person and remote employees.

# Authors



**Tim Irvine**

Managing Director  
Accenture Federal Studio Lead  
Accenture Federal Services



**Shayla Smith**

Human Capital Defense Portfolio Lead  
Accenture Federal Services



**Kristen Vaughan**

Managing Director  
Human Capital Lead  
Accenture Federal Services



**Laurie Johnson**

Managing Director  
Learning Services Lead  
Accenture Federal Services



# Exploring Tech Vision

For over twenty years, the Accenture Technology Vision has identified the most important emerging technology trends impacting businesses, governments, and society over the next three years. What sets it apart is its focus on the underlying forces behind each trend as well as the frank advice it offers on how enterprises should respond. The Accenture Technology Vision is produced by Accenture Labs and Accenture Research with input from over one hundred Accenture leaders and more than two dozen external experts. It also incorporates the findings of a global survey of over 6,000 enterprise leaders.

This year's global report, Leaders Wanted, examines how the world responded to the unprecedented stresses and challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic. What we learned is that many enterprises are far more agile than they thought. Their challenge going forward is accelerating their digital transformation to meet the new expectations left in the pandemic's wake.

The Accenture Federal Technology Vision 2021 applies these trends to the unique demands and

challenges facing the U.S. federal government. It builds upon insight from more than 50 Accenture Federal Services experts as well as survey data from two hundred federal program, business and IT leaders.

Readers can assess the accuracy and relevancy of our predictions for the federal government by reviewing last year's report. Key trends in the Accenture Federal Technology Vision 2020 included the I in Experience, AI and Me, the Dilemma of Smart Things, Robots in the Wild, and Innovation DNA.



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## Contributors

John Conley  
Steve Watkins  
Riley Panko

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