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The way forward?

The public and private sectors should be looking at remote working to save time and money, argues Michael Robertson.

Remote working – when employees perform their day-to-day role away from a central office for all or part of their working day – has been made more practical by the increasing sophistication of IT networks. With one of the most varied and geographically disparate workforces in the UK, local authorities are beginning to harness the benefits of this flexible working practice.

One key advantage of remote working is cost-saving, through both freeing up office space and reducing the time and money spent by staff travelling to and from a central location. There are also less tangible benefits, such as increased productivity from a more motivated workforce and reduced environmental impact due to smaller head office overheads and a cut in travel requirements. Operating a decentralised workforce can also provide a measure of protection in terms of disaster recovery if the worst was to happen at the central office.

On the flipside, not all individuals enjoy remote working and many will miss the structure and social interaction of an office environment. There is also a fear of loss of management control and the potential threats to confidential data that remote working could entail. The most obvious of these relates to the physical removal of data on laptops, discs or memory sticks and the danger of such devices being lost or stolen. After the recent discovery of a memory stick containing usernames and passwords for the Government's Gateway computer system in a car park, Prime Minister Gordon Brown went so far as to say that ministers could never guarantee the security of sensitive data. Of course, human beings will make mistakes; but how can the IT industry promote data security to encourage the spread of flexible working practices in the government sector?

One solution which has already been successfully deployed in both central and local government organisations is two-factor authentication (2FA) – a system based on something a user knows, such as a password, and something they possess which is hard to counterfeit. 2FA can be simple enough to use every time a remote user logs on to access a central IT




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system and provides much greater security than traditional username and password solutions. This is because access requires the possession of something only the authorised user has and a log-on process that involves inputting a unique, randomly generated, one-time password (OTP). The OTP is usually transmitted via a different medium to the one being used to access the system – a good example would be an OTP being sent as an SMS message to a mobile phone.

Using mobile phones in 2FA has many advantages. The technology is familiar to most users and the public's reliance on their mobile phones for everyday communications means they are nearly always to hand. Another key advantage is that no additional hardware or token needs to be purchased or deployed, reducing both the cost of 2FA implementation and its environmental impact.

Most 2FA solutions are quick and easy to deploy across a wide range of council employees, from carers working in the community to finance clerks and other administrative staff. In addition, many software packages come with reporting tools that capture user log-in details and enable the administrator to fully audit all access requests.

Data security should already be at the top of the agenda for local government, particularly in light of the current Code of Connection requirements. The extra protection the Code provides can help remove the fear of unauthorised access and provide a secure alternative to the use of portable devices for data transfer.

Motivated by the growing demand for flexible working from an increasingly mobile workforce, and encouraged by the responsibility to lead on work-life balance and environmental sustainability, it has never been easier for councils to harness the improved security of today's IT networks and make remote working a highly accessible proposition. 

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