



Q&A Executive Viewpoint

A conversation with SHARON WOODS



SHARON WOODS

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A cloud leader discusses how the Defense Department pivoted quickly to support remote workers during the pandemic

How did the Defense Department rapidly deploy cloud-based solutions during the pandemic?

On March 13, 2020, the White House declared the COVID-19 outbreak to be a national emergency, but the mission of national defense did not stop. My team at the Cloud Computing Program Office (CCPO) refers to March 19, 2020, as the “Thursday that never ended” because that is when we started to develop and deploy a version of the Microsoft Teams collaboration tool for DOD that we called Commercial Virtual Remote, or CVR. That was the day about seven CCPO people started working 24 hours a day, seven days a week to pull off what ended up being the largest Microsoft 365 tenant in the world. This happened in less than 30 days!

CVR is a perfect example of authentic, agile development where the minimum viable product didn’t include all functionality, but it was, true to its name, minimally viable. It included collaboration capabilities such as chat, voice and video calls and file creation, which is more than what DOD was using on an enterprise level prior to the pandemic. CCPO continued improving the CVR user experience and rolling out customer-focused enhancements, including a self-service portal where users could manage their own access and an alerting portal that informed CVR users of environment-wide disruptions in service.

There was some pain in the beginning, but that is always to be expected when you’re pushing out such a massive initiative. We failed forward, learning about those pain points through feedback loops and addressing them iteratively. For example, employees thought the CVR welcome email on March 29, 2020, was a phishing scam. Someone responded to our help desk by stating: “Not today, ISIS.” Additionally, the help desk was overwhelmed at the

beginning as everyone was trying to access CVR. CCPO quickly learned the value of leveraging change champions and help desks throughout the community to assist at both the tactical and strategic levels during CVR rollout and maintenance.

CVR was fully transitioned to other elements in DISA for sustainment in October 2020, which exemplifies the cross-organizational partnerships that drove success. The military services and components across DOD were an integral part of the iteration and adoption process.

How do cloud efforts fit into DOD’s larger modernization strategy?

Embedding the end user – the warfighter – is key so that the user’s needs are at the forefront throughout the development process. Embedding the security community in the development process is also important. When user and security equities are baked in from day one, the conversation changes from one of compliance to one of rapid and secure capability implementation.

DOD has a lot of work to do in evolving the application of security principles to modern technology, but the forward movement is happening and encouraging.

What can other agencies learn from DOD’s experience?

The mission has to drive capability delivery. COVID-19 forced us to focus on what mattered most and prioritize accordingly. DOD had to preserve force readiness and the health of the DOD community. This mission transformed traditional approaches that would have been too slow to be relevant.

What is the point of any particular capability? Why bother? If the answers to those crucial questions are not at the core of the initiative and in everyone’s mind, project direction and velocity are lost. ■

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