

From *Governing's*  
September 2002 issue

## ELLEN PERLMAN'S TECH TALK

### Mind Your Own Business

**Techies in several states are all keyed up about providing public employees with do-it-yourself services.**

**W**hen most employees want to switch primary-care physicians, they dig up a fat health-plan manual, figure out whom they have to call to process the request and take time during the work day to make the call.

For Virginia state employees, the process is simpler: They log on to their computers — at home or at work — and do it all themselves. By clicking on EmployeeDirect, they can review and make all kinds of changes to their health plans — adding a spouse to their plan or changing their address. And they're likely to check the right box and spell their name correctly. "Who cares more whether it's right and timely than the employee himself," asks Sara Redding Wilson, director of the Virginia Department of Human Resources Management. "We're trying to reach out here, using technology to make it easy for employees."



Employee self-service isn't exactly a catchy phrase, but it's what tech folks in the human resources area are keying in on. It's an obvious boon to efficiency and productivity. Having employees key in information themselves saves time and improves accuracy. Wilson figures that during the one month that Virginia allowed self service on open enrollment for health plans, the human resources agency saved \$40,000. On the productivity side, employees who handle their own information online tend to do so at home on their own time.

Although many states and localities see the benefits, few as yet are taking advantage of the possibilities. Those who are getting

into the movement are at the bits-and-pieces stage. Georgia, for instance, allows employees to sign up for health insurance, long-term care, dental insurance and flexible-benefits options online. A new Oklahoma Web site offers a retirement-benefit calculator that employees can use to compute projected benefits — saving calls to the pension plan. South Carolina offers e-Leave: Employees can submit a leave request without going to a human resources person who would have to enter the data manually, check to see if the employee has accrued the requested leave time and have it accounted for in a financial records database. South Carolina CIO Matthew DeZee figures a paper request costs \$40 to \$50 while an electronic request is in the range of \$5.

Michigan, which has offered some employee self service for the past year, added a new feature in May that allows employees to sign up for direct deposit of their pay checks to their bank. Of all the self-service features the state offers, the most popular has been the employees' ability to check pay statements and annual leave balances.

As with so much relating to technology, states are finding there are plenty of employees who have no interest in serving themselves. The Michigan human resources department offered self service to 32,000 state employees. About 20,000 of them accepted. The rest were either uncomfortable with the Web, haven't found anything they want to go on the Web to do, "or they're totally resistant to it," says Richard Huneke, director of the human resources management network division in the Department of Civil Service. "It's a cultural change everyone has to work through." According to Huneke, employers believe a 60 percent acceptance rate is a good number in a program that makes self service voluntary.

And then there are states whose grand plans for self service are on hold. North Carolina bought a software product that would have allowed access to 401(k) plans, let employees enter their travel plans online and more, but the state's severe budget crunch put those plans on ice.

If it were available, North Carolina state employees would probably make good use of it. Of the three portals offered at [ncgov.com](http://ncgov.com) — for business, for citizens and for employees — the employee portal gets the most hits, even though right now it's more of an information center than a self-service shop.

The employee portal currently offers ongoing events that are updated constantly, and 17 categories of information, ranging from state government policies to training opportunities to state jobs to employee forms. Making that information available online saves a lot of work on the part of other state employees who would otherwise be taking calls to answer questions.

When states get flush with cash again, it's likely many will add

self-service features. Virginia's Wilson would ultimately like employees to be totally responsible for the personal information pertaining to their position. "Talk to me next year," she says. "I think we'll be there."

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