



Reimagining the SCIF Life

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The consulting firm *Gartner* predicts by the end of 2023, more than half of U.S. workers will work remotely at least part of the time. While numerous studies have been conducted on the impact of remote work on work-life balance, none have focused on the nuances of the cleared Intelligence Community (IC) workforce. On the premise of national security and the need to protect sources and methods, the IC workforce has traditionally worked in restrictive Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility (SCIFs). The global pandemic forced organizations to create or re-envision remote work, and the IC has demonstrated that a hybrid solution to support flexibility can be successful.

This paper focuses on how to permanently adapt and reshape the way the IC workforce works. COVID-19 challenged the assumptions about how the IC approached work and helped to clarify what was critical to be done in a classified environment and what could be done remotely. While the effects of the pandemic still linger on, the societal trend for remote work and telework is still in place and has changed the dynamics of when it is a necessity to work in a SCIF, as well as how that environment can be reconsidered to improve the workplace. Some of the IC has restructured in innovative ways to accommodate the desire and need for flexibility that supports work-life balance. Some employers actively pursued change on a permanent basis while other organizations only made temporary adjustments.

The authors focused on the post COVID-19 evolution of classified work in the IC and offer potential ways forward for "Reimagining Life in the SCIF." Recommendations are presented for thought and consideration in terms of work-life balance, risk, retention, and culture.

RETAINING AND ATTRACTING CLEARED TALENT

Working in a SCIF is a critical component of national security that requires cleared top talent. Today, the competition for cleared talent has become increasingly important for organizations that need to hire and retain their workforce to maintain their competitive edge. However, recruitment efforts have been hampered by the reluctance of new hires to compromise on their lifestyle. Since the pandemic, the demands for significantly more work-life flexibility have increased. *"It is very hard to attract talent to do work in a SCIF when they can work from home, not have SCIF/clearance restrictions in their personal life, and get paid a lot more at the end,"* said one SCIF manager in an INSA forum.

CULTURE

Culture is hard to change, but the pandemic gave us an unexpected insight into what is possible. The IC's rapid response to COVID-19 exposed the status quo for what it is – a way of doing things that is accepted but far from inevitable. When we were forced to accept a level of risk that was higher than we preferred, we were able to focus on protecting and managing rather than locking down and preventing. This "temporary" pivot is part of a much larger shift that has been happening for years – from physical security to cybersecurity. And yet now some organizations are looking to return "back to normal." If the IC is to fully utilize its most valuable asset – the people – we should challenge the mindset that the way things were is how it needs to be.

Another cultural challenge is the practice of grouping all security and technology into the same category, when in fact the needs are as varied as the people who work throughout the community. All Wi-Fi-connected devices are not created equal, and policies should reflect the differences between – for example – an iPhone and a pacemaker. A culture that sees both devices as equivalent makes it near impossible to work in a SCIF with a pacemaker or a hearing aid.

WORK LIFE BALANCE

The post-COVID workforce demands that greater work-life balance continue to be a priority for successful organizations. For the IC, working cloistered in a SCIF has been the accepted way of life. Yet during the pandemic, it became clear that some work can be performed successfully outside the SCIF. This trend needs to expand, not contract.

Work outside the SCIF can be achieved with:

- Emerging technology;
- Fast-tracking telework policies;
- Increased use of open-source intelligence (OSINT) capabilities allowing for more to be achieved in unclassified environments; and
- Investment in time and resources to create flexible SCIF life policies.

Achieving greater work-life balance *can* be achieved. Factors include leadership buy-in and financial support and the willingness to change. Key changes to SCIF life flexibility include looking at policy, remote work, and innovative means to achieving mission, as well as understanding risk, retention, and culture components.

POLICIES TO IMPROVE RETENTION

The challenge ahead is to sustain the SCIF-life outreach initiative in a way that resonates with the Next-Gen workforce. Policies need to allow access to the Internet to check email, important for communications with doctors, schools, daycare providers, and eldercare providers, and not use firewalls that prohibit access. Technology needs to be as good or better than what employees have at home. Mobile phone lockers need to be provided and remain accessible during breaks.

The current process for registering medical devices for use inside SCIFs is convoluted and often inconsistent across different agencies and buildings. Some sites are unaware of their local policy and have given misinformation to those who inquired. This creates an undue burden on affected employees, who may choose to decline an onsite visit because of registration ambiguity or personal humiliation through the process.

To address some of these problems for the IC, it is essential to adapt workplace policies to meet the needs of today's employees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There are potential solutions to improving “SCIF Life.”

1. FINANCIAL INCENTIVES

- Offer financial incentives for workers who work at a SCIF for 75% (+) of the month, provide compensation for on-call and when called, offer compensation similar to a +25% salary bonus structure.
- Government agencies should recognize, and pivot properly to compensate for market conditions and adapt existing as well as to-be-awarded contracts.

2. AMPED UP TECHNOLOGY

- Improved technology-enablers inside SCIFs. More streamlined security processes to encourage and incentivize access to state-of-the-art capabilities (hardware, network, software, collaboration tools) available in the SCIF similar to what is available in the commercial world.
- For staff who work in the R&D realm, there is a persistent requirement to transfer data content from unclassified to secure networks. There are varying obstacles across companies and agencies that make this an inefficient process.

3. INTERNET ZONES

- Provide sound-proof phone booths with open phone lines, dispersed "cell phone zones" inside buildings, and access to unclassified email at desks or in centralized "computer labs" that are well maintained.
- Another solution is to provide unclassified access inside buildings for personal use and unclassified media cafes located at the perimeter of the building with obfuscated internet access points for personal devices.

4. UNIVERSAL DEVICE REGISTRATION

MEDICAL DEVICES

- The current process for registering medical devices for use inside SCIFs is convoluted and often inconsistent across different agencies and buildings. A solution is to establish universal reciprocity for medical devices across the Department of Defense and IC.

FITNESS TECH

- A helpful option for the health-conscious who use Fitbits and similar fitness monitors, is a standardized policy for what devices are permitted with what specific restrictions. Today, the policy varies by organization and building causing confusion.

5. WE-WORK SCIF FACILITIES

- Classified tasks that can be undertaken in a company SCIF may be easier for employees to get to than a government site—if the contract permits. Some innovative companies are providing SCIF as a Hosted Service or SCIF Hoteling Facilities to increase remote access flexibility and capacity. Pilots of secure remote technologies permit classified work (so far up to Secret level) from any location. Implementation hurdles have included difficulty of changing security policy and culture; challenges of making technology secure enough for high levels of classification; and resources to scale technology solutions. However, emerging technology is proving that these hurdles can and are being achieved and organizations are currently executing these. However, these solutions and policy changes must be adopted and occur on a universal scale.

6. ACCELERATE THE REFORM OF SECURITY CLEARANCE PROCESS

- Improving the security clearance process involves several aspects, such as background checks, polygraph tests, adjudication, and reciprocity.
- + Accelerate adoption of the National Background Investigation Services (NBIS) system. NBIS is designed to replace older background investigation systems with an enterprise IT system that streamlines end-to-end clearance processing. The Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency is leading the development of NBIS, which is available at www.dcsa.mil/is/nbis/nbis_news. This goal is for this to serve as the federal government's one-stop-shop for personnel vetting, providing a secure and robust data protection system, improving the customer experience, and better integrating data across the enterprise.

ADAPT MODERNIZED RULES ON LIFESTYLE CHOICES

- + The USG should consider adapting some lifestyle restrictions to accommodate current societal trends on marijuana use, foreign contacts and travel, as well as financial disclosures.

IMPROVED FOOD AND PAY CHOICE

- + Improved food options for onsite 24x7 staff can also improve the quality of life for SCIF employees. Government and contractor cafes operate with limited hours, which do not help staff who work extended hours. Some site cafeterias—and many vending machines—are cash only (in an increasing plastic world). Often, after-hours staff must resort to self-service food carts and vending machines, which offer poor quality options to sustain a variety of healthy dietary needs.

BLENDED WORK WEEK

- + Where possible, implement flexibility for a blended work week to support both unclassified and classified work. Unclassified work could be performed at home or via a telework site. Classified work could be performed at a home Agency site, approved contractor site, SCIF as a Hosted Service site, or SCIF Hoteling site. Per management, supervisor, and mission requirements, individuals could work a blended work week scheduling their days for unclassified telework and work in a SCIF.

It should be noted that any changes to SCIF-related policies inherently create risk within the cleared personnel ecosystem, and organizations should take the steps necessary to mitigate that risk as much as possible. Updates and innovation to policies that govern cleared personnel are always important for workforce recruitment and retention, but potential risks with those changes must be considered understanding that risk will never be eliminated but reduced as much as possible.

In addition to these solutions, organizations should recognize the changing attitudes of younger generations toward military and defense work. Younger generations may see less value in such work and prioritize social programs and social justice issues. To make SCIFs more appealing, organizations must not only offer incentives and technological solutions but also communicate the value and impact of the work being done in these facilities.

Overall, the challenge of recruiting and retaining talent for SCIFs is complex and multifaceted. Organizations should explore a range of solutions including incentives, technology, and alternative mission areas, to create a workplace that resonates with the next-generation workforce.

Agency leaders and managers play an essential role moving forward with policies, training, technology enhancements, and employee engagement. Development of these programs will allow managers flexibility in work schedules, build trust, increase readiness, and retention of talent. Risk will be mitigated though enhanced insider risk programs, IT monitoring, and management oversight.

By addressing these challenges, public and private sector organizations can ensure that they have the talent necessary to fulfill their mission in an increasingly demanding open world.

CONCLUSION

Both government and industry employers will need to continuously address the quality-of-life challenges inherent to working in a SCIF. Attracting and retaining top talent in the cleared workforce will depend on innovative solutions consistent with mission requirements to improve work life in a SCIF environment.

We learned during the pandemic that telework and remote work were a significant plan of action for continuous operations and level of services and mission in both the public and private sector. Within the IC we experienced increased employee productivity and high morale per greater employee flexibilities afforded and the realization that a work blend could exist with identification and separation of unclassified work performed outside the SCIF.

A balance of SCIF work-life solutions is imperative and should be revisited for sustainment and future of the IC workforce.

REFERENCES

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