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U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

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For Immediate Release:
Sept. 22, 2011

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Doing it better, faster is the constant for the Afghanistan Engineer District-South's information technology section

KANDAHAR AIRFIELD, Afghanistan—Keeping a district headquarters wired tight to 14 forward operating bases in the harsh environment of Afghanistan is a big challenge. Especially when your customers are Americans accustomed to seamless information technology. To meet these challenges, the information technology section at the Afghanistan Engineer District-South is always be on the lookout for improved equipment and processes.

According to Chris Brooks, chief of the district's information technology section (J6), the 23 contractors assigned to his section are continually looking for ways to improve the district's current technology as well as develop new capabilities.

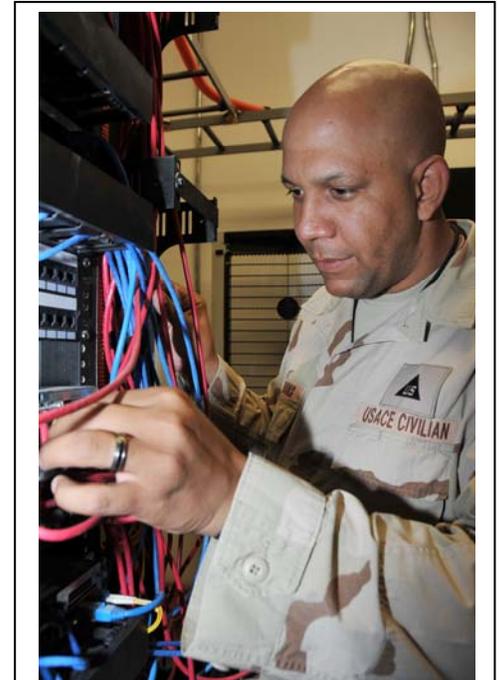
“The J6 is responsible for all technology functions on USACE compounds throughout southern Afghanistan that are typical of an Army Signals Battalion,” said Brooks, a native of Dallas, Texas but a resident of Spokane, Wash. “We provide communications security, user support, satellite communications and connectivity, disaster preparedness and file recovery, fidelity of data services, software procurement and support, web development services and video teleconferencing.

“We also provide Blackberry services, but because the cell tower infrastructure in Afghanistan is still being developed, our capabilities are somewhat limited,” Brooks said.

Despite the wide variety of services offered, the J6 faces a few significant challenges that hinder reliability.

Dust is the primary culprit and it plays a considerable role in the system's overall capability, said Brooks. “In addition to interfering with satellite linkage, dust permeates everything. Because there is no dependable fiber optic infrastructure in Afghanistan, we are dependent upon expensive satellite access and good weather, meaning relatively dust-free skies,” Brooks continued. “Plus, our electronics require frequent dusting and vacuuming for optimal performance.”

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Chris Brooks, chief, information technology section at the Afghanistan Engineer District-South secures a cable in the district's server room. The district has about 100,000 feet of computer cable on its Kandahar headquarters compound. (USACE Photo/Karla Marshall)

Affordable and timely access to USACE databases in the U.S. is particularly important for mission success. “We need to pull data from shared budget and project management databases efficiently,” said Deborah Duncan, Deputy District Engineer deployed from USACE’s Winchester District. “Any interruption slows our ability to function effectively. The district has a finite time to accomplish a lot of construction so we are continually looking to the J6 to improve access to State-side systems.”

Incorporating immediate needs with strategic and long-range planning means the IT team continually searches for appropriate technologies. U.S. forces anticipate being in Afghanistan through 2014, so maximizing capability for the next three to four years is critical. “We put crazy emphasis on doing things the best way, in the least amount of time,” said Brooks.

For instance, the IT team is looking to improve the way the district accounts for people in emergency situations. The current process includes paper rosters and telephone calls to the district operations center. “Our goal is to transition to an automated personnel accountability solution, using wireless and tablet computer technology so real-time capabilities are vastly enhanced,” said Brooks.

The J6 is installing an experimental wireless network for non-military applications and once the system testing is complete, wireless capability will extend to the district’s government computer network as well.

“Going wireless will definitely be a force multiplier,” said Brooks. “The J6 exists to support the district’s mission and when we do our job well, the district is effective.”

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USACE’s Afghanistan Engineer District-South provides design and construction services throughout southern Afghanistan to support the International Security Assistance Force and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan. The work is carried out in Regional Commands South, Southwest and West with the goal of achieving counterinsurgency effects and bolstering the Afghan Government’s services to its people.

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