

Come Fly With Me, Paperlessly: DCMA Converts to Electronic Travel Orders

by Ms. Katherine H. Crawford, Staff Writer

On Oct. 1, 2006, the Defense Contract Management Agency (DCMA) completed the conversion begun in 2003 from paper travel orders to the Department of Defense's (DoD) fully automated, electronic Defense Travel System (DTS). The system was designed to make official travel management easy and efficient for DoD employees and to save taxpayers money.

DTS is a database that consolidates and expedites all aspects of the travel process, including filling out the DD1610 travel form, booking flights, filling out

vouchers, submitting various forms to the appropriate approval authorities, maintaining receipts and providing reimbursement for government travel credit cards (GOVCCs) through electronic funds transfer (EFT). "With DTS there's no manual intervention — we do all our reviewing, approving, everything online," said Ms. Dalene McCauley, lead defense travel administrator, DCMA Headquarters. Recently, DTS went from a desktop application to a Web-based product, and it was at this point that DCMA strongly began pushing its use.

On Oct. 1, 2006, DCMA completed the conversion begun in 2003 from paper travel orders to DoD's fully automated, electronic Defense Travel System.

The system also does much more than travel arrangements. "DTS is a fully integrated financial management system of which travel procurement is only a small part. It is a seamless, secure, continuously evolving system that manages accounting and disbursing of funds while providing

an automated travel service. It is currently linked to 41 DoD partner systems, 30 of which are financial," explained Ms. Yvonne Kendall, alternate lead defense travel administrator, DCMA Headquarters.

Benefits

The two primary benefits to DTS are the cost savings it offers taxpayers and the Agency and the increased amount of control it gives users. The cost-saving benefits are significant. For example, paper vouchers submitted by DCMA personnel are sent to the Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS) office in Columbus, Ohio, for approval, payment and filing. The DFAS Denver office automatically pays for orders generated in DTS. Archiving is now done electronically, including receipts, without paper. Processing each travel voucher costs \$44.62 when using a paper-based system, according to DFAS fiscal year 2007 billing rates and customer bill estimates.

Using DTS, this same procedure ranges from \$1.39 for Army vouchers to \$4.24 for Marine Corps vouchers. Processing DCMA vouchers falls within this range — that's a huge savings for the Agency and taxpayers. And in Ms. McCauley's experience, the greater the number of employees who use DTS, the greater the cost savings, which is one of the primary reasons DCMA is pushing its use.

The electronic method also substantially benefits users by allowing for faster approval and reimbursement.

(Right) Ms. Yvonne Kendall, alternate lead defense travel administrator, DCMA Headquarters, at work in Alexandria, Va. (DCMA staff photo)



“In deploying DTS, we found that one of our major challenges was acceptance. There are many skeptics who do not want DTS to work. People resist change.”
 – Ms. Dalene McCauley

With paper receipt submissions, repayment occurs approximately four to six weeks later, sometimes longer. Documents processed through DTS result in payment within 72 hours, from the point of approval to the point of full action. This quick turnaround time has substantially reduced the number of delinquencies on employees’ travel cards. Since users can have their travel card information embedded within DTS, the reimbursement is simultaneous with their payments. Ms. McCauley noted that approximately one percent of DTS users at DCMA do not have GOVCC or EFT information in their profiles. However, their numbers are declining.

The second major benefit DTS offers users is increased control. “The traveler now controls his or her own destiny,” said Mr. Bill Mercier, lead defense travel administrator, DCMA Aeronautical Systems and Naval Sea Systems Divisions. Added Ms. McCauley “They go [into DTS] and make their own decisions, or at least that’s what we’re trying to encourage them to do — it’s not a clerk preparing their travel authorizations. “It’s a lot like using [online travel reservation sites] Expedia.com or Orbitz.” The ability of travelers to select their own flights, hotels and rental cars reduces frustration, as they are able to tailor arrangements to their needs, and decreases the number of calls to busy travel agents. In terms of overall control, DTS makes DCMA (rather than DFAS) personnel the approval authority for travel orders, allowing the Agency to better track travel.

Challenges

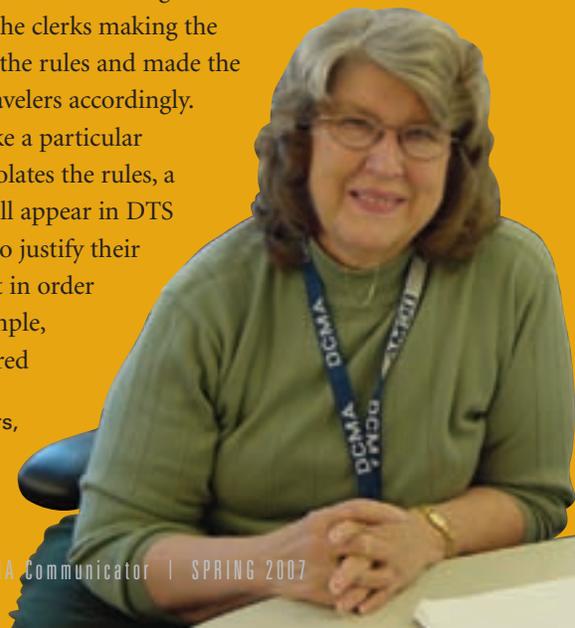
Ms. McCauley and her team have certainly encountered resistance in their push to convert everyone to DTS. “In deploying DTS, we found that one of our major challenges was acceptance. There are many skeptics who do not want DTS to work. People resist change,” she said. This reluctance to a new system may also be due in part to the fact that DTS is an extremely complex system. To alleviate anxiety and familiarize employees with it,

DCMA has done extensive training in the past year, though training remains another of the most significant challenges, primarily because it is ongoing. DTS upgrades are done frequently as the system is constantly being updated and improved. Every time there is an update, Ms. McCauley and her team are responsible for informing employees. With offices spread across the country and the world, this is difficult.

Fortunately, the DTS Web site offers training on the system’s use and features, and DCMA will rely on this computer-based training (CBT) for the majority of information dispersal. The Web-based training is designed for travelers, routing officials and administrators, and it includes DTS demonstrations, a reference library, information on travel regulations and policies, and more. Mr. Mercier highly recommends the use of the CBT training module for all employees. For major changes to the system, DCMA will send its defense travel administrators out into the field to convey the new information as well as use video conferences and the DCMA Portal software application. The more employees utilize the training programs and familiarize themselves with the system, the easier it will become for them to use it.

Employees using DTS are becoming more knowledgeable about travel rules and regulations, which are embedded within the system. DTS won’t allow users to make arrangements that violate these rules, requiring users to be more cognizant, whereas previously the clerks making the arrangements knew the rules and made the arrangements for travelers accordingly. If a user tries to make a particular arrangement that violates the rules, a note to this effect will appear in DTS and users will have to justify their desired arrangement in order to proceed. For example, employees are required

(Right) Ms. Dalene McCauley, lead defense travel administrator, DCMA Headquarters, at her desk in Alexandria, Va. (Photo by Ms. Carolina Woods, BRTRC)



“Anyone who is a first-time traveler and who doesn’t travel often finds the system cumbersome — it’s not intuitive. It’s second nature to me now, but for some people who don’t use it on a daily basis it’s harder.” – Ms. Dalene McCauley

to use city-pair flights. If a user is unable to do this or this arrangement doesn’t meet mission requirements, the user will have to explain why he/she isn’t choosing a city-pair flight. The order won’t be able to proceed through the authorization process without an explanation that an approving official can understand. This is the type of action that many employees aren’t used to, according to Ms. McCauley.

Employees using DTS are also responsible for maintaining current personal information profiles. “A great deal of frustration arises when employees submit their vouchers and realize that they haven’t been paid,” Ms. Kendall stated. “Ninety-nine percent of the time it is a result of travelers having incorrect EFT information in their profiles. By using DTS, travelers assume a number of responsibilities that include: maintaining an up-to-date traveler profile in DTS; electronically signing and forwarding completed travel claims to authorizing officials; and preparing itinerary amendments and all post-trip settlement claims by EFT.”

Learning to use DTS takes time and can be frustrating for many people. “I personally can go in now and do orders in five minutes, but when I started I have to admit it took me 30 minutes to an hour to maybe two hours to figure out exactly where to go and what I wanted to do,” Ms. McCauley revealed. “Anyone who is a first-time traveler and who doesn’t travel often finds the system cumbersome — it’s not intuitive. It’s second nature to me now, but for some people who don’t use it on a daily basis it’s harder,” she added. However, frequent travelers really like the system. “The Aircraft Operations group is a prime example,” said Ms. McCauley. “They use DTS all the time, and they were hard nuts to crack in the beginning; they thought [the system] was a

pain, but now they love it and they’ve really, really embraced it and use it all the time — and these guys travel a lot.”

Overall, the feedback from Agency personnel about DTS has been “mixed,” stated Ms. McCauley. Those who have used DTS extensively like it because they control their own decisions and get reimbursed quickly, and most other employees are adapting to and using the system. Though there is a small percentage of holdouts still using paper travel documents, their number continues to decline. Several months ago DCMA measured the number of DTS users and found that 9,753 of DCMA’s approximately 10,500 employees — almost 93 percent — were self-registered in the system and able to create travel documents.

On the Horizon

Looking to the future, Ms. McCauley believes that DTS is 95 percent complete, though it will always be evolving and improving. One of the updates being rolled out soon is the “reservation refresh” feature, which will impose a time limit on all reservations that are created. Users will have 24 hours to make their arrangements and submit them for approval, which ensures that travel orders remain current with flight and accommodation availability. After 24 hours, data will be deleted and users will have to begin again. “It will be a more sequential and time-sensitive project, and that’s going to be difficult for some people to get used to,” said Ms. McCauley. She knows of many instances where employees would begin making travel arrangements months in advance and save the form for completion closer to the travel date. Later they would go back into the system only to find that the flights they had selected were gone

(Right) Mr. Bill Mercier, program analyst, DCMA Aeronautical Systems and Naval Sea Systems Divisions (DCMA staff photo)



“Basically, we want people to know that it’s there and just to get out there and start using it. It’s new and, like anything else, using it comfortably comes with time.” - Ms. Dalene McCauley

or the prices had changed. DTS programmers are hoping the imposed time limit will help preclude this type of problem and bring DTS in line with other online travel services, where real-time arrangements must be made quickly or the system times out to prevent users from accessing data that is no longer valid.

Another change on the horizon involves the permanent change of station (PCS) module, which will eventually be rolled into DTS. Currently, DTS is for temporary duty assignments and local travel only. Additionally, DoD has developed a brand new travel office, the Defense Travel Management Office (DTMO), which manages both the travel credit cards and DTS. Ms. McCauley hinted that the DTMO has begun some new user-friendly initiatives that will benefit travelers, agencies and the services but was not at liberty to give details.

One possible cloud on the otherwise sunny horizon of DTS’s future is a congressionally mandated independent study of the system that began in December 2006 at the request of Sen. Norm Coleman (R-Minn.), former chairman of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations. A bill has been prepared to eliminate the travel planning features of DTS, which he believes do not work,

but maintain the accounting component. The study’s findings are due to Congress in April, and Dr. David S.C. Chu, undersecretary for personnel and readiness, DoD, has ordered that no changes be made to DTS until the results of this study are made available.

Conclusion

With more than one million people registered as users and approximately 13,000 users logging into the system every day as of Nov. 1, 2006, DTS is already well established DoD-wide. “I see DTS as a success story,” said Ms. McCauley. “We have problems with it, I’m not going to deny that, but at the same time I think everybody is starting to embrace it a little bit more. Basically, we want people to know that it’s there and just to get out there and start using it. It’s new and, like anything else, using it comfortably comes with time.”



Your DCMA DTS Contacts

Ms. Dalene McCauley, lead defense travel administrator, DCMA Headquarters.
(703) 428-1463 dalene.mccauley@dcma.mil

Ms. Yvonne Kendall, alternate lead defense travel administrator, DCMA Headquarters.
(703) 428-1496 yvonne.kendall@dcma.mil

Mr. Bill Mercier, lead defense travel administrator, DCMA Aeronautical Systems and Naval Sea Systems Divisions.
(617) 753-4350 william.mercier@dcma.mil

Ms. Shirlene Williams, lead defense travel administrator, DCMA Ground Systems & Munitions and Space & Missile Systems Divisions.
(310) 900-6169 shirlene.williams@dcma.mil

Ms. Joyce Grant, lead defense travel administrator, DCMA Special Programs Division.
(703) 428-1894 joyce.grant@dcma.mil

Ms. Karen Stephens, lead defense travel administrator, DCMA Information Technology Customer Service Organization.
(703) 428-0851 karen.stephens@dcma.mil

For information about DTS, including computer-based training on its many features, please visit the DTS Web site at: <http://www.defensetravel.osd.mil/dts/site/index.jsp>.



(Top) Mr. Robert Brooks, Lead Defense Travel Administrator, DCMA International Division
(Above) The Defense Travel System’s Web page