

YourArmy

Soldiers: Fix AKO

Officials say: Live with it

By Joe Gould
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Soldiers hate AKO. That was clear when Army Times asked users of Army Knowledge Online what they think about the Web portal.

Their frustration was evident in more than 70 e-mails from Army active-duty, civilian and retired users.

The most common complaints:
■ AKO is frustratingly slow.
■ It has a cluttered interface.
■ Its security features are too cumbersome.

■ Its search engine is useless.
For many, that adds up to a decision to avoid AKO whenever possible.

Launched in 2001, AKO is the secure gateway for soldiers to access e-mail, file storage, instant messaging and other collaboration tools. It boasts more than 2.33 million unclassified users and more than 123,000 classified users, including active duty, National Guard, Reserve, civilians, contractors, family members and retirees, as well as 350,000 users through

the Defense Department's Defense Knowledge Online, which it hosts.

The system has an annual budget of \$67 million and is operated by a team of some 20,000 employees — larger than an Army division.

AKO users said the system has lost relevance for them, that they avoid it in favor of commercial services like Microsoft's collaborative tool SharePoint, or Google Docs and Gmail, whose usefulness and intuitiveness they would like to see AKO emulate.

"AKO has gone from bad to worse," wrote Dale Carpenter, a retired major turned contractor. "It's one of the most poorly designed portals that exists on the Web ... The search engine yields wildly unpredictable results, and useful links, such as to publications and references are buried or nonexistent. There is an art to Web-portal design; AKO represents the entire Army, and not in a good way."

Army doctrine writer Mike Scully, a retired lieutenant colonel now at Combined Arms Directorate on

Fort Leavenworth, Kan., complained that AKO's collaborative tools are "amazingly slow." For doctrine writing, which requires working together across agencies and services, AKO's cumbersome, multistep permissions system makes it a "relic" and "a last resort."

"I'll tell you, our primary tool is SharePoint," said Scully. SharePoint has "a good version-control system that allows us to make adjustments as necessary. I don't know of anyone now — AKO is the last thing you want to use to do that, and at one time it used to be the thing."

In an interview with Army Times, Gary Winkler, the Army's top official in charge of AKO, defended the portal as well-used and the best product created, maintained and upgraded with limited resources. He said AKO remains relevant with more than 350,000 unique logins, and 800,000 to 900,000 hits each day, adding that with so many users, "you can't keep everybody happy." "There are a lot of people using



the heck out of it, including myself. I've been on it exclusively at work, for everything I do, since March, and I'm moving my whole organization of 20,000 people to it," said Winkler, the program executive officer for enterprise information systems at Fort Belvoir, Va. "We're wringing some of the warts out of it, but we're certainly operational."

AKO's program office, which polls 20,000 users each week, reported 78 percent of users said they couldn't live without AKO e-mail. Winkler did not know the ratio of positive to negative responses from recent polls, but said "a lot of it is positive, with suggestions for improvement."

"We're always looking for feedback and ways we can tweak it

'Computer geek' helps soldiers navigate system

By Joe Gould
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Chief Warrant Officer 3 Mike Danberry is like the Lone Ranger, except he's not behind a mask. He's behind a computer.

A vigilante tech support guru, Danberry fields questions — unpaid and on his own time —

from people suffering problems related to computers and Pentagon-issued Common Access Cards.

"I'm just doing what I can to help people out because I know people are stressed out about it," Danberry said. "I've gotten people in Iraq, Afghanistan, Germany,

Italy, Korea, Japan and all parts of the United States and the Horn of Africa."

Since Danberry started www.militarycac.com almost four years ago, it has grown to more than 80 pages chock full of information about CAC readers and how to install them.

"It came from people really needing to use their CAC cards about 3½ years ago," he said. "Now you can't do anything without an ID card, you can't shop at commissary or the PX or access certain websites like AKO."

Danberry also answers as many as 15 e-mails and one to

three calls per day. He posts three phone numbers on the site, but asks that people call only between 2:30 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. eastern time.

Danberry said he fills a gap Army's help desks don't cover. Tech support workers typically follow a set of solutions from a script or decline to give support to home computers, but Danberry does it all.

"I'm a computer geek. I can ask