



PHOTO BY ROB CURTIS/STAFF; ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN HARMAN/STAFF

body, the 40-member Army CIO Executive Board, which includes members from each Army command; all headquarters organizations; the Reserve and the National Guard. It is chaired by the Army chief information officer, G6. (Lt. Gen. Jeffrey Sorenson retired as CIO earlier this month and his deputy, Mike Kreiger, is acting CIO.)

Winkler said the board, which sets the requirements and resources for AKO, has funded AKO at \$67 million this year, "the bare minimum," with room for some modest improvements. "To the extent that we can work a little more efficiently, stretch our dollars further, we've put out some improvements," he said.

The Army is apparently moving in another direction, at least for e-mail. The CIO announced efforts last month to move e-mail services to a cloud-based e-mail hosted by the Defense Information Systems Agency. The plan, billed as a cost-saver in the long run, is to provide soldiers with a single e-mail account and network identity by September 2011.

AKO, however, will continue to function as a repository of Army knowledge, data, applications and the global address list, Winkler said. "As far as I'm concerned, AKO stands as a viable capability even if DISA does e-mail as an enterprise capability," he said. "Until the DISA effort stands up, it is functioning and viable, AKO is it."

One of the most common complaints about AKO is the security, which some users said is such a hassle, they avoid AKO altogether.

certain questions based on my knowledge to figure out what road they should go down," he said.

Danberry's depth of knowledge borders on the obsessive. He owns 11 computers, running Windows XP, Vista and Windows 7, and both Mac Leopard and Snow Leopard so that he can test how CAC readers and related software perform.

"So when I'm giving informa-

tion to people, it's not something I heard from somebody," he said. "It's something I personally tested so I can safely say, 'Yes, it works' or 'No, you're going to have problems.'"

He is in school at Fort Gordon, Ga., to reclassify from the military occupation specialty 915E (automotive maintenance officer) to 255A (signal systems support technician).

He'll be with the 55th Sustain-

ment Brigade, a Reserve unit at Fort Belvoir, Va., answering IT questions for the Army by day and in his spare time.

As an unofficial helper for the official CAC Resource Center on AKO, he's used to being on both sides of the fence.

"I kind of laugh when I answer one guy from both sites and he thinks he's getting two different people," he said. "It's just me." □

Logging in is simple with DoD's ubiquitous ID, the Common Access Card, and a peripheral card reader. Without such a card, users must remember a complex password and answer three security questions.

Family members and retirees aren't issued a CAC. Steve Broussard, a retired lieutenant colonel in Orlando, Fla., said it's frustrating when the system questions him and permits his inbox to fill with spam.

"In a word, it takes forever," said Broussard, now a defense contractor using AKO for research. "I have no problem with a secure password ... but then you've got to answer three questions. Give me a break."

Maj. Jason B. Nicholson, a foreign area officer assigned to the U.S. Embassy in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, said he is nine hours from the closest CAC reader. He once mistyped his password, was locked out, and couldn't remember the correct format for a security question about his birthday.

Nicholson gave up on AKO in favor of Gmail, and so did his wife, who is a computer forensics expert. She told him that AKO's security measures wouldn't stop a determined hacker.

"AKO offers some incredible capabilities for soldiers and their families, and it's a tool for them to control their access [to information]," Nicholson said. "But what in fact the Army's doing is pushing people out because it's so difficult and cumbersome, and they've ceded control."

Winkler said AKO's security requirements and features,

See AKO next page

SOLDIERS' THOUGHTS ON AKO

Here are excerpts from a few of the letters that soldiers sent to Army Times about Army Knowledge Online:

The AKO website and its intended application was a great idea; however, its layout and links are overwhelming and confusing. The largest complaint I hear from within my unit (and I agree) is that there is no search engine for looking up specific units and points of contact within that unit.

Staff Sgt. Albert P. Parr
Marseilles, Ill.

■ Add space to e-mail to allow you to have more contacts in your address book and more space to allow you to fit more mail in your mailbox.

■ Large attachments that I can easily send on Gmail I can't send using AKO. This should be fixed.

■ Add a Facebook-esque social networking feature so soldiers can keep up to date with their buddies.

■ It should be easier to find people from other branches of the military.

■ The AKO's new interface, Webmail 2.0, has some nice functionality but has loads of errors, and opening attachments takes too long.

Capt. David Falvey
Boston

The most important thing that I'd like to see happen with AKO is the ability to manage your own personnel changes and issues at your own level. [You should] be able to upload college transcripts, certificates (marriage, educational, etc.), and any documents that need to be updated. Address finance issues; update your SGLI and DD93.

Spc. David Smith
Fort Huachuca, Ariz.

AKO is way too difficult to navigate; the security requirements are ridiculous and the new Webmail is insulting. Being overseas, it defaults to a foreign language and the unhelpful staff at AKO will not fix it; they "suggest steps" that can be taken. Last time I checked, English was the official language of the United States, so why in the hell won't they fix the issue?

Sgt. 1st Class Daniel Stoner
Mannheim, Germany

AKO is by far the worst Army-related website I have ever dealt with. It is slow, and when it's not slow it doesn't work. AKO is extremely disorganized. The home page makes you go, "What is this, where is everything?"

Spc. Salman Rafat
Wiesbaden Army Airfield, Germany

I love that AKO has a vast amount of information for soldiers and their families, but what [good] is the information if you can't access it? It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to access AKO at times, especially from home.

Staff Sgt. Sonia Baker
Fort Hood, Texas

Being a traditional National Guardsman, I rely on AKO Webmail quite a bit to communicate with my unit. My success rate for logging on from home during busy times (usually weekday mornings) is about 50 percent. I don't need a lot of bells and whistles from AKO; just the ability to access e-mail and view personnel, medical and training information from home. The system's very cumbersome and slow and could use a good streamlining (or replacing).

Chief Warrant Officer 2 Chris Butler
Colorado Springs, Colo.

Most definitely I try to avoid it. Its only purpose is e-mail, but once you go into the mail options and forward all your mail to your CONUS e-mail, good riddance ever having to log into it. It would be so much [better] if navigating the site was faster and less clunky.

Sgt. Gabriel Dominquez
Forward Operating Base Tillman, Afghanistan

AKO was forced upon us, and its value is marginal. It should serve as a source for data, briefings etc. Here in Afghanistan, it's not at all user-friendly and sometimes we can't log on. The security settings are too extreme for this expeditionary environment.

Maj. Howard Keebler
Kandahar, Afghanistan

Trying to use it from a home computer without a CAC card is a 15-20 minute ordeal. When I have an Army work e-mail address I forward my AKO mail to that account and NEVER use AKO if I can help it.

Maj. Christopher Reich
Fort Leavenworth, Kan.

AKO is the biggest headache I face as a soldier, hands down. It can go to Hell and die, die, die.

Staff Sgt. Jeremy Layman
Scammon, Kan.

Links in e-mails are deleted. This causes huge problems with using AKO. Vital information is often included in the links and having them deleted requires you to forward the message to a civilian account.

Staff Sgt. Michael Belay
Pearl City, Hawaii