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# The IDSS Challenge: If We Can Do It, So Can You

By

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Yesterday, Easter Sunday, was a rather typical day in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. After putting my life on the line during the harrowing 13 kilometer drive from my villa at Al-Yamama Village compound, I parked my car in the Ministry of Defense and Aviation (MODA) parking lot and proceeded to hike the additional kilometer to my office.

As is usually the case at 0700 in the morning when I arrive, only the MODA guards, our Sri Lanka janitor, and myself were present. No problems here; this is exactly what I expected and how I wanted it to be. The U.S. military establishment (United States Military Training Mission to Saudi Arabia, or USMTM) personnel are due in at work between 0730 and 0800. The first thing I do in the morning, well . . . maybe the second, after making coffee, is to fire up my trusty computer and check my E-mail. I'm generally allotted about an hour to read and answer my mail before people start wandering into my office to make inquiries on student and training status.

I enter the local host, supported and provided by the U.S. Army's 54th Signal Battalion, and check my E-mail account. After wading through my files, I exit the host and enter the Interoperability Decision Support System (IDSS) using LINKPC and our TELNET interface to the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA). Being that the fine folks at DISAM whined about my mail being held-up in the TELNET packet system, I have my IDSS accounts hold my E-mail at IDA and I enter and check it daily. Sure enough, more mail here too. Unfortunately, some of this mail requires me to do some research, so I print out the requests, leave IDSS, and start my morning duties.

As I write this, I can sit back and marvel on the technology that gives me instantaneous contact with my worldwide training counterparts. Just eight short months ago I was told that E-mail, and in particular, IDSS, would never operate in Saudi Arabia. Today, I am the System Administrator of IDSS user group 2A3B1 and have 33 active IDSS members assigned to Saudi Arabia. To be sure, E-mail is our lifeline over here in one of the more remote parts of the world.

When I arrived in Saudi Arabia, we had limited local E-mail connectivity and our only line to the outside world was our trusty FAX. I'm still amazed when I think of the logistical nightmare my predecessors encountered as they attempted to manage the incredible amount of paperwork and coordination required in the country with the world's largest FMS program. Using only a FAX and telephone they managed to supply and track over 4,000 students per year entering various U.S. training establishments. Even the Training Management System (TMS), a software product produced by DISAM and indispensable to Training SAOs, wasn't brought on-line in Saudi Arabia until early 1993.

Compounding the problem of huge student and case loads is the Kingdom's work-week scheduling. Our work week starts on Saturday morning and ends on Wednesday afternoon. Depending on the location in the U.S., we are anywhere from eight to eleven hours ahead of our training compatriots work-day. As you can see, the only direct telephone interaction we can have with the U.S. is between 1600 our time on Monday until about 0800 U.S. local time on Wednesday. This doesn't provide very much time to get things done and generally forces us to stay at work until late each night. This situation is even worse when the Saudi Military working hours are included in the picture. MODA work hours are from 0800 to 1430, Saturday through

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Wednesday. Therefore, either we get our business with the U.S. done by Tuesday night, or we have to wait until the following Monday evening to clean up our loose ends.

Headquarters, U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), the Defense Security Assistance Agency (DSAA), DISAM, and the Saudi Arabian SAO, all realized that IDSS would be an essential component necessary to fix this huge information bottleneck. Unfortunately, the local phone lines have so much interference on them that direct phone connection with IDA and IDSS was almost impossible. Connection times varied from none at all up to about a maximum of five minutes. This was unacceptable for downloads of our Standardized Training Lists (STLs), let alone for normal E-mail. Two SAO members, Major Rob Gaston and Captain Doug Turlip, were determined to make IDSS a reality and proceeded to attempt a LINKPC interface with TELNET using a Bahrain TELNET station.

Both had achieved limited E-mail results while I was attending DISAM in July 1993. However, they found that LINKPC would not connect with the Bahrain TELNET and they had to enter using a seven bit (E71) interface versus the IDSS eight bit (N81) protocol. Even using a VT100 keyboard emulation which is much like the LINKPC keyboard interface, they found that many standard IDSS keys and the ability to download/upload would not work. DISAM was worried that Rob's and Dave's hard work at cracking the Saudi IDSS barrier would be lost when they rotated back to U.S. assignments. Charlie Collins (come on now, everyone in the Security Assistance business knows DISAMs' very own Charlie Collins!) decided that a new "victim" needed to be picked from the current DISAM Overseas course to carry on with the work in Saudi Arabia. He felt that if LINKPC and IDSS could come on-line within the Kingdom, than the obstacles facing other remote SAO posts could be easily confronted and remedied.

This is where I entered the picture. Charlie knew me from one of my previous lives as both an instructor at the International Officer School at Maxwell AFB and as an IMSO. When I entered DISAM for the second time as a prospective SAO member, I was shown the value of IDSS for the first time. I remarked to Charlie that it sure would have been a great tool to have when I was part of the CONUS international training staff and that I was dismayed that it was not available to Saudi Arabia. Did Charlie ever have a good deal for me! After he determined that I could actually operate a computer (I'm not really computer literate, but even so not totally illiterate), he proclaimed me the new person on the chopping block to solve the Saudi LINKPC interface problems. I wasn't sure that he had picked wisely, but I was excited to accept the reins from both Rob and Dave (neither of who I ever personally met, but had many conversations with over E-mail). When my class graduated, Charlie patted me on the back and sent me off on my quest to bring IDSS into the Kingdom for the benefit of all.

When I got to the Kingdom, my sense of urgency increased almost immediately when within the first week I programmed and sent a student to a U.S. course without a valid class quota. Although I was "new," I had worked long enough as an International Military Student Officer (IMSO) to understand that sending students without quotas was a "no-no." The reason behind the action was easily understood. First, Rob Gaston, whom I replaced, had rotated back to the U.S. over a month before I showed up in-Kingdom. Second, the updated STL from the U.S. was delayed in the mail (really!) so I was working with a previous STL which was six weeks old. It was Sunday when the student showed up asking for his Invitational Travel Order (ITO). I checked the student files and found a file Rob had started on the student. Everything was there: correspondence with the Embassy, MILDEPS, the student's physical, biographical data, security clearance, and more. The old STL still didn't show a quota, but then it was six weeks old and I was sure that the quota was in the mail. I sent the student. The new STL arrived on Tuesday and we had no quota. This would have been a real short career move on my behalf, except the school came to my rescue and found an extra chair for the student.

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The combined whining from all members of the SAO and logistical personnel about the lack of IDSS interconnectivity and the high visibility my student and I garnered from the MILDEPS back home got us the interest needed to fix our in-Kingdom problems. I started at the top and worked my way down as more and more people told me that IDSS, and in particular LINKPC, would never work on either the Saudi phone lines or the Local Host. During this trying time, I managed to receive both an E71 (192.231.39.25) and N81 (192.231.39.21) IDSS TELNET connecting address. We could now connect through the local host using PROCOMM and the TELNET E71 interface directly to IDA. This was good news for E-mail, but most of the other IDSS functions such as the SAMIS, MISIL, CISIL, DIFS, and STL databases required LINKPC and would not operate under PROCOMM's E71 data interface.

About this time I met Sergeant Shirk. He was working in one of those deep, dark, back rooms near and with the 54th Signal Battalion Local Host. I explained about my LINKPC interface problem and also talked about how everyone kept saying that IDSS would never work because of the eight bit protocol. Sgt Shirk stated that there was nothing better in the world than making something that couldn't work, work. I left him with my bag of problems as I had with numerous other "computer experts" and continued on my way. During the next three weeks, I continued my work at re-mapping the PROCOMM keyboard and download protocols. I had made some headway. I could now enter the different IDSS areas and look at the data, but not all key strokes had the desired effect, and I still could not perform downloads.

One morning, I entered my Local Host E-mail, and behold: a note from Sgt Shirk. "Who is this?" I wondered. After reading the note, I would never again ask this question. He stated he could now connect with IDSS using LINKPC and had performed a STL download without any problems. Were there any more "can't be done" items that needed to be taken care of? I closed down my computer, jogged to the car and drove with the nerve-racking local traffic to Sgt Shirk's back office. Sure enough, he let me use his computer and I entered IDSS using the previously unusable LINKPC. He even allowed me time enough to download the entire 12,000 record Saudi Arabian STL database. He explained that he had designed a five modem bank which took the N81 LINKPC interface directly into the Local Hosts' TELNET port, thus bypassing the E71 operating system. He also designed a new LINKPC "Riyadh.Cmd" and "Riyadh.Scr" which facilitated the new routing. It was amazing. Not only did it work, but it worked well! Sgt Shirk was another great reminder for me that when it comes to really getting things done in the military, talk to the Sergeants.

I'm sold on the value of IDSS. The ability to both send and receive information as it's made available from the MILDEPs is without equal for those of us half-way around the world. My only complaint now is that many of the training establishments haven't taken the time to invest their talents on the system. IDSS is the ultimate "open-door policy". It allows you to contact any and all Security Assistance organizations, whether next door or in the middle of a huge desert. The most amazing thing about IDSS is the amount of interest generated through the logistical and financial personnel. I wanted IDSS for both the ease of its E-mail and the ability to download current MILDEP STLs. We have six training SAO members in-Kingdom and we are all on the IDSS system. The participation of our logistics folks really came as a surprise. They now outnumber the training SAOs by a factor of 4 to 1 within the Kingdom. During the last two months I have averaged three new account requests per week and will have to increase our modem bank access to ten lines in the near future if demand continues.

If you are not on IDSS, get on! If you don't use IDSS, use it! I promise, it is easy, fast, and a very handy tool at your disposal.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Major Dan Reichel is the US Military Training Mission (USMTM) Joint Staff FMS Training Advisor assigned to both the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Defense and Aviation (MODA) and the Ministry of Interior (MOI). He arrived at his present location in Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, on 6 Aug 1993. Previous security assistance positions included instructor, Squadron Officer School Course Director, and IMSO at the International Officers School, Maxwell AFB, AL. He has a B.S. in Industrial Engineering from Southern Illinois University and an MPA (Public Administration) specializing in Human Resources, Motivation Theory, from Golden Gate University.