

IT Leaders Examine Evolving Role of CIOs

Cultural change is needed to keep pace with changing technology.

The successful digital transformation of the federal government will pivot on a new breed of chief information officers, government and industry leaders say.

“CIOs will be the central authority,” said Matt Lira, a special assistant to the president in the Office of American Innovation, speaking to an audience of federal and private sector IT executives in Washington, D.C., on May 17. Delivering the keynote address at the Accenture-sponsored conference, “How IT Leaders Are Embracing Digital Strategies to Advance the Mission,” Lira reflected on the role of CIOs in the government’s digital transformation, including trends and practices in the IT market.

The new prototypical IT leader – CIO 2.0, perhaps – will navigate the largest IT enterprise transformation ever attempted. The digital overhaul of government will happen amidst an uncertain environment of shifting cultural and political norms, a quickening pace of change, the emergence of new technology platforms and a mandate to more closely

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Accenture Federal Services

align agencies’ IT functions and their missions. The undertaking will involve two million employees across decentralized, uncoordinated federal agencies that, as a group, are 20 times larger than most large corporate offices, he said.

Lira noted that a recent executive order enhancing CIO authority at the agency level acknowledges the correlation between CIO empowerment and the successful digital transformation of agencies. “Where CIOs are empowered, they are achieving success,” he said. “Where there are CIOs in name only, those agencies, frankly, are the furthest behind.”

The measure of IT success in the federal sector is itself changing. For some stakeholders, declaring success will happen when a digitally transformed government is able to regularly deliver services in ways that resemble consumers’ experiences – online banking, mobile shopping and other digitally enabled transactions – in the private sector.

“Technology in government is too often 10 or 20 years out of sync,” Lira said. “That delta creates a degree of frustration.” Recent administrative changes are granting direct-hire authority to agencies that should make it easier to bring in fresh IT talent, including at the CIO level, he said.

Troy Schneider, editor-in-chief of FCW and GCN, led government and industry experts in a panel discussion of big data, analytics and artificial intelligence. The panelists were



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Susie Adams, chief technology officer, Microsoft Federal; Srinivas Bangarbale, chief data officer, U.S. Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC); and Sanjay Koyani, executive director for innovation, Office of the CTO, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Natesh Manikoth, chief data officer at the Federal Aviation Administration, shared his perspective on transformative change; and Biniam Gebre, managing director of Accenture Federal Services, spoke about the challenges of leading large-scale government process transformation.

Dave McClure, CIO advisory lead, Accenture Federal Services, agreed that CIOs will be critical to the digital transformation of government. He told IT leaders attending the conference that he “would like to see recruitment of CIOs who have some business background and who understand how to partner and create solutions in quicker time frames than what we have historically been doing in government.”

“Being able to talk in a hybrid manner is critical for CIOs,” said McClure, who characterized the government’s shift away from legacy systems as “the great digital awakening.”

That awakening is at an inflection point, the conference’s experts said, and CIOs will lead the charge to knock down impediments to change. Among those challenges is resistance to using new tools, particularly in risk-averse environments that resist change.

“We have technology that actually can improve government quite quickly. It’s the adoption and the business case and the dialogue that’s not sophisticated,” McClure said. “The biggest challenge in government is our ability to execute. We can come up with great ideas and technology, but we’ve got to execute. ... Implementation is where things break down.”

IT itself can help CIOs and other transformational leaders to break the impasse. Evolving platform technologies, for example, will help the next generation of CIOs to overcome resistance, in part by triggering cultural and political shifts.

“These platforms position organizations to think about how they can deliver compliance and policy, not through paper but through tangible assets ... [thereby] enabling value-added capabilities to the mission, to deliver their mission-execution process, their engagement offering, their service delivery channels,” said Todd Schroeder, vice president of government digital strategy, at Salesforce. “That, I think, is the cultural and political shift that we see happening ... a new authority to think differently about how you want to add value. ... We’re seeing a



big shift right now in putting the customer at the center of what we do.”

The path to transformation is nonetheless unknown, and its navigation requires a new vision. “What got us here, won’t get us there,” Schroeder said.

In the push to achieve digital transformation, federal agencies are proceeding at different paces. Among the leaders, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is making structural changes that promote the digital transformation of government, the conference speakers said. Under the leadership of Secretary Sonny Perdue, the department has streamlined IT leadership, consolidating 22 component CIOs into nine mission-area assistant CIOs. The change has reduced bureaucratic barriers and improved communication, said Francisco Salguero, deputy chief information officer at USDA. “That’s the cultural shift we’re making, enabling people to talk more about mission,” Salguero said.

The results, at times, have been dramatic. Installing a button on an agency website, a process that in the past could have required two weeks, today can happen in two minutes.

“Sonny Perdue, at USDA, he’s not giving speeches about modernization,” McClure said. “He’s making it happen.”