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ACCELERATING IT MODERNIZATION

Federal CIO Strategy Leader: How IT executives can drive & sustain transformative change

What is the biggest misconception regarding technical debt?

There are actually two important misconceptions. The first is that an agency's executive leadership doesn't care about technical debt. On the contrary, they are anxious for IT to manage and measure it more rigorously. For the CFO, this insight can support new approaches to financial planning and budgeting. And for other CxOs, providing transparency into the real cost of delivering services and associated risk can spur them to rethink existing processes.

A second misconception is that technical debt analysis is a one-time drill done every five-to-ten years to benchmark the depth of the challenge for long-term planning. In reality, it should be an ongoing exercise to assess the true cost of IT, as minimizing technical debt is as important as remediating its impact.

How can federal agencies get ahead of technical debt?

When you find yourself in a hole, the first thing that you should do is stop digging. In other words, baseline your current technical debt to determine where your most critical vulnerabilities and liabilities reside. This will guide your remediation strategy. As one example, we use our technical assessments to identify the most cloud-ready candidates for accelerated migration to create quick win opportunities.

And despite the number of burning platforms and competing priorities, you can't lose sight of the ongoing importance of managing and minimizing technical debt. The shift to agile can make many of these trade-off decisions more explicit. One of the benefits of flagging these liabilities earlier is the potential to secure or set-aside funding to eventually resolve.

ACCENTURE FEDERAL SERVICES CATALYSTS

Dave McClure, Ph.D., serves as Principal Director for Federal CIO Advisory Services at Accenture Federal Services. He works with federal leaders on strategic IT initiatives including digital transformation, IT modernization, cloud computing and business process reengineering.

He served as GSA's Associate Administrator for Citizen Services & Innovative Technologies from 2009 to 2014. In this role, he led a number of government-wide digital services, including USA.gov, Data.gov, Performance. gov, Challenge.gov and BusinessUSA.gov, as well as the development of FedRAMP, the federal government's standardized approach to accrediting cloud computing services.

McClure has also served as Managing Vice President for Gartner with responsibility for federal IT research; Vice President for the Council for Excellence in Government; and Director for IT Management at the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO). Most recently, he served as Chief Strategist of Coalfire Federal, where he advised on cyber-security for cloud computing.

Q&A

The Clinger-Cohen Act (CCA) that you helped write formally established the CIO role within the federal government. Do you think that the position is keeping pace with the tremendous changes in technology that we are experiencing?

In some respects, yes, but not always consistently across government. What we have learned is that while there is always a desire for greater accountability, it can be hard to legislate the CIO's exact duties. FITARA is the latest example to build upon Clinger-Cohen, adding broader powers and more specific responsibilities. This gives CIOs greater clarity to what should be important but they still need to determine how to accomplish these goals.

For the CIO, the risk is that this create an expectation that they'll rule by fiat – thou shall and thou shall not—that may limit their ability to take on a larger role within the agency. With technology's growing prominence, it is critical that we have IT leaders that can work across the agency and this requires a more collaborative mindset. So, while continuing to meet mandates, they must also be flexible or outcome-driven in their approaches.

And more than a seat at the table, agency leadership must be willing to entrust them with critical initiatives, such as improving customer experience or readiness. This is what we're seeing in the commercial sector, where a deep understanding of technology's potential and a cross-enterprise perspective provides CIOs with the vantage point needed to drive real change.

In the Federal CIO Playbook: IT Modernization, you write that federal agencies shouldn't rely solely on the IT Modernization Fund—why's that?

The size of the fund – $100 million allocated in FY18 and $110 million expected in FY19 – limits its reach and potential. As a competitive fund, this means that there will be winners and losers, so agencies need to consider other funding streams.

In reality, the unique cost models associated with different technologies demand that agencies consider multiple funding strategies to maximize their impact. In some cases, cloud migration and retiring legacy systems can deliver rapid ROI that can be reinvested elsewhere. In other examples, IT leaders will need to work with additional stakeholders to craft a larger business case where process or operational cost savings are used to support underlying technology investments. The Federal CIO Playbook highlights the four most common plays.

Do federal CIOs need a platform vision for their agencies?

One of the topline demands is for IT to become more adaptive and deliver critical capabilities at mission speed. Digital platforms that build upon the cloud can make this happen while also providing needed cost-savings and standardization. And more than a single platform, agencies need to see themselves long-term as a platform of platforms where services and platforms are interoperable but optimized for specific requirements.

An underappreciated benefit of platforms is how they enable richer and easier analysis. Data is often consolidated and analytics can be more readily integrated into processes to generate real-time insight. In a platform environment, this type of closed-loop analysis is more common, generating continuous improvement.