Are we at an inflection point for IT modernization?

By Richard Spires
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A few weeks ago, I was in Philadelphia attending ACT-IAC’s premier conference, 2018 Imagine Nation ELC. What was striking to me at the conference was the palpable change in attitude regarding the federal government’s posture in IT, and IT modernization in particular. A confluence of factors have come together to give many of us renewed hope that government can improve its ability to both leverage and effectively manage IT to significantly transform government mission delivery.

The most important factors come from leadership in Congress and the administration. Congress took an important step in 2015 by passing the FITARA Act, and more recently added the MGT Act and the Program Management Improvement and Accountability Act (PMIAA) as a means to address the need to jump-start and better manage modernization efforts at agencies. And while there has been a lot of grumbling about the FITARA scorecard, it has focused agencies on understanding the importance of taking IT management seriously.

As for the Trump administration, everyone -- regardless of their party or politics -- should admire two aspects of what the this administration is doing. First, leadership (the OMB Deputy Director for Management Margaret Weichert and Federal CIO Suzette Kent) did not throw out IT and modernization initiatives started under the Obama administration because they were “not invented here,” but instead assessed and built on what was working! Second, and even more importantly, the administration developed a President’s Management Agenda (PMA) that, from my perspective, reflects a pragmatic approach to driving real positive change through the effective use of technology.

I am particularly impressed with the focus of the first three foundational CAP goals, which include:
1. IT Modernization;

2. Data, Accountability, and Transparency; and

3. People – Workforce for the 21st Century

By leading with modernization, administration leadership is placing the emphasis squarely on addressing the governmentwide need to break the stranglehold of legacy systems. Further, I particularly like the emphasis on people. If we are serious about modernizing the way in which government operates, we need a reskilled workforce to not only help make that transformation possible, but also to acquire new skills that align with the needs of new operating models.

During the ELC conference, we released the results of a ‘Reimaging Government IT’ report that is based on a survey of 300 government leaders from IT, procurement and finance. The conjecture that there is a renewed focus on the importance of IT is borne out in the survey, with more than 94 percent of feds having felt a shift in momentum toward the future state of federal IT -- and 53 percent said it’s been significant.

Yet we still face a real dilemma, in that the federal executives estimated that only 23 percent of IT budgets actually go to modernization initiatives, so while the motivation is there, it is not yet backed up with funding. Most striking (but not surprising to me), the survey reports that executives feel training and workforce development is the number-one need to make a vision of modern government a reality, yet only 28 percent of respondents feel very confident in the way their agency is preparing employees for the future of government IT. And amazingly, only 16 percent of federal IT leaders felt very confident in the way their agency is preparing employees for the future of government IT.

So the feeling of change in the air is there for many of us, but there are clearly still significant obstacles as outlined in the survey results. From my experience, there are two critical success factors to overcome such obstacles and to ensure agency transformations can be successful:

- The first factor is the direct and unequivocal support of agency leadership (i.e., agency head and deputy). Without this level of support, any significant transformation effort is doomed to fail. I like the example of USDA serving as the first Center of Excellence. USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue’s and Deputy Secretary Stephen Censky’s support is clearly unequivocal and this level of support can serve as a role model for this Administration. But that support and
commitment needs to be replicated across all departments and agencies, and even at bureau levels within the large federated departments like DHS and Commerce. That is a challenge for White House and OMB management leadership.

- The second factor is what I call agency readiness for transformation. Think of this as the maturity of the agency to be able to successfully execute modernization projects in order to drive transformation. Much of this maturity assessment revolves around program and project management maturity that is institutionalized at an agency. Having competent and experienced PMs is certainly part of this assessment, but it goes well beyond good PMs.

Is there the understanding across the agency of what it takes to deliver true transformation, including the technical, management, and even support for the necessary cultural change? Agencies must assess their true readiness to undertake significant transformation and this ties back to CAP Goal 3: People in the PMA. Having the right skills and also individuals in leadership levels with the right experience in transformation initiative is imperative. If agencies are not ready, then start small while seeking guidance and support and help from other agencies, to include GSA’s 18F and Digital Services.

Further, the appropriate partnering with industry is essential. Beyond contracts, leverage non-profit organizations like ACT-IAC and The Partnership for Public Service to get outside industry perspectives on how best to successfully initiate and drive transformation efforts.

I like the momentum I am seeing in federal IT, but now the pressure is on to produce meaningful forward progress and results at an agency level. This administration should build on the momentum from the Center of Excellence model demonstrated at USDA to rapidly drive transformation at many federal government agencies.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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