What's Hot In Federal Tech, Per GSA's IT Category Lead

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Bill Zielinski, head of the Information Technology Category, shares the trends he's seeing in federal IT through thousands of ongoing acquisitions governmentwide.

The administration is pushing hard on IT modernization in 2019, but that buzzword covers a lot of ground in the federal government. From his position as leader of the General Services Administration's Information Technology Category, Bill Zielinski offered his take on what's hot for fiscal 2019.

"You might have heard it before—that there's a focus on IT modernization," Zielinski said during an event Tuesday hosted by ACT-IAC. "But as we really talk about the efforts that we have in place for IT modernization, I'm going to break it down into four broad areas that there's a lot of activity going on."

Cloud

To the surprise of no one, cloud led Zielinski's list.

"We've been talking about cloud now—we can actually use the term decades in government—from going from Cloud First to where we are today," he said. "If you haven't had a chance to read the new Cloud Smart policy that's out there … Rather than a declaration of Cloud First, it really does go into some really helpful guidance, some very helpful mechanisms for how agencies can employ cloud moving into their modernization plans."

This year, Zielinski said he's seen a shift toward more "true commercial cloud" buys, rather than hybrid or on-prem solutions.

"You'll continue to see that as a theme and continue to see a variety of different initiatives move out in government for that," he said.

Emerging Tech

"Just about every day, if you're taking a look at who's interested, you can find RFIs, you can find articles, you can find a lot of things about how agencies are looking to leverage things like artificial intelligence, machine learning, robotic process automation,blockchain/distributed ledger technology in order to meet their mission needs," Zielinski said.

"I think the size of the challenges require us to look beyond just human capital and look into some of these emerging technologies as force multipliers and a means by which we can crack some of the really sticky problems and issues that we have in IT today," he added.

Rise of the Chief Data Officer

Since the passage of the OPEN Government Data Act, agencies are under a mandate to improve the use of data in decision-making and appoint chief data officers to assist. Zielinski said he is already seeing that CDO community begin to organize.

"Artificial intelligence, machine learning, robotic process automation, blockchain/distributed ledger technology: those all rely upon a foundation of data. So, it's no coincidence that you see at the same time we're talking about some of these other technologies, that we're also talking about the role of the chief data officer and what we need to do to organize ourselves toward that," he said.

Supply Chain Risk

Lastly, Zielinski noted an increased focus on cybersecurity risks posed by technologies and components manufactured in adversarial countries. And that focus is changing the conversation in acquisition circles.

"Four years ago, five years ago, when we talked about acquisition and supply chain risk, those were not necessarily connected conversations in many instances," he said. "It was like, 'Hey agencies: Buy what you're going to buy. Then, on the backside, you need to figure out how you're going to protect it. How is it you're going to address any sort of risk or challenges that you have there.'"

Now, agencies are largely looking to "buy down" some of the risks by being willing to pay more for products with strong, verified provenance.

"What that means for you all as providers or as agencies, is that you need to be thinking at that very earliest point about how you address though challenges in the supply chain through your acquisition strategies," Zielinski said.

He noted the 115th Congress introduced 226 pieces of legislation addressing supply chain risk, compared to just 22 pieces introduced by the 114th Congress. Many of those proposals, however, included strict language that gave Zielinski pause.

"A lot of times what those pieces of legislation say are, 'Anyone doing business with the federal government shall.' And some of them can be really, really prescriptive," he said. "A lot of times my assessment is that this might be so prescriptive that it's going to add cost—the industry is going to pass along the cost to us. And really, at the end of the day, if I'm now paying more for my products and services, that means I'm actually going to have less money to put other protections in place."

Further, too many regulations might cause companies to shy away from working with the government, particularly if other verticals in their business don't require the same precautions.

"I highlight this only because it is critical that you all are watching the ball on this," Zielinski told the crowd of agency and industry representatives. "Because I think you will see, over the coming months, even more activity around supply chain risk. There are opportunities for you to participate and you should do so."