

FEATURES Racing To Innovate

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President Obama's technology-focused policies stand to infuse chief information officers with more authority and influence.

When White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs stepped up to the podium in the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room for the first time, just two days after President Obama's historic inauguration, a hungry White House press corps had much to ask. The war in Iraq, Guantanamo Bay detainees, and Cabinet appointments were the usual topics Gibbs could expect reporters to bring up. But the story that made headlines days, weeks and even months later began when Gibbs uttered five little words: "The president has a BlackBerry."

The super-secure handheld device engineered by the National Security Agency that Obama uses to communicate with his wife and top aides quickly became the symbol of his intent to use information technology to drive policy and change in government. It's also a sign that the influence of chief information officers is on the rise, much like the president's "Day One" transparency memos instructing his administration to operate under principles of openness and to spur citizen engagement online, and the use of technology to provide details on pressing topics such as his stimulus package and swine flu. "IT is vital to bringing about the change he is calling for," says Vivek Kundra, whom Obama appointed in March as the first federal chief information officer. "The role of the CIO is central to the agenda."

Kundra, whose title includes e-government and IT administrator at the Office of Management and Budget, plans to work closely with his colleagues through the interagency Chief Information Officers Council. He's already created a panel to explore how government can embrace cloud computing and other innovations. "It's vital they have a high degree of engagement from the business perspective and also from the technology side of the house," he says. "This will be very important, especially when we look at the performance agenda of this administration how IT maps to that."

One of Kundra's key goals is to convince agencies to pursue IT projects that directly support their missions rather than employ technology for technology's sake. He also wants to avoid "faceless accountability" when it comes to technology spending.

Kundra and agency CIOs have a chance to play a bigger role in government management, but they also must work hard to keep up with Obama's demanding administration, a depressed economy, budgetary belt-tightening, and an evolving IT and data management landscape. Department CIOs, whom Kundra believes have been fearful of innovation and have learned to survive by avoiding risk, could now report to the top executive and have a seat at the table with agency heads. In short, it's a new day for CIOs and the federal IT workforce. But there are possible traps they will have to avoid.

GROWING PAINS


For starters, CIOs will have to have their feet firmly planted in two worlds - one where cutting-edge technologies are encouraged and another focused on running the day-to-day business of government. The former is shaped by an eagerness to embrace the latest and greatest applications; in the latter innovation is viewed as a headache and a potential vulnerability. "The challenge will be working in both worlds and making those two worlds work together," says Ed Meagher, former deputy CIO at the Interior and Veterans Affairs departments. "There's going to be lot of pressure on the CIO community to help this administration do the things it wants to do, like making government more efficient, more accessible to citizens and more transparent." Meagher is now director of strategy for health affairs for SRA International's global health sector.

The old government world has CIOs hamstrung. They know their lumbering legacy systems, some of which are decades old, must be upgraded or replaced and that can be

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done only at a great cost over time. They also know the expensive task of adopting new technologies eventually will pay for itself, but it has to be done right. And the government doesn't have a good track record of doing IT right, according to Meagher. Systems "have to be bullet-proofed, and they have to be secure," he says. "Privacy has to be taken into account, and they have to be scaled for mass utilization rather than a single user."

Unfortunately, the time it takes to make sure new systems work properly doesn't square with the Web 2.0 world's insatiable demand for information and expectation of instant gratification. Information sharing in the Obama administration is "an irresistible force" and a big part of the CIO's job, Meagher says.

But the formidable task doesn't dampen the spirit of technology chiefs like Andy Blumenthal. As chief technology officer at the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Blumenthal is confident the role of CIOs and CTOs will carry far more weight in senior strategic management meetings under the Obama administration. But that doesn't mean these chiefs can wait for top executives to come to them; they will have to be proactive. IT leaders in the public and private sectors "are constantly fighting fires when they should be helping organizations align and adapt for the long term and stay focused on the big picture," he says.

The question is whether CIOs' newfound clout can help them solve the decades-old problem government IT has faced - breaking down the stovepiped structure of networks and using standard solutions across an agency and government. "That's going to bring us much more powerful IT for the end user and in a more cost-effective way," Blumenthal says.

One example is Blumenthal's multiyear portal project to merge ATF's old intranet and Internet sites into a new controlled-access clearinghouse. Phase 1 focuses on navigation and functionality. Phase 2 infuses interactive capabilities such as Web conferencing and wikis. Phase 3 will aim to expand it all so ATF stakeholders, from the Justice Department to state and local partners, can participate. "We're balancing the old world with the new world," he says.

MORE MONEY, MORE INFLUENCE

John George, senior vice president and CIO of Vangent, an IT management and outsourcing firm, says CIOs will adapt to the new demands. A core competency of a successful CIO is "being adaptable, being able to move when the organization moves, and making sure infrastructure that supports the organization moves with it," he says. "The ones who really get it - and there are a lot of them - will understand what it means to adapt to change."

In this administration, the most proficient CIOs will have their moment to shine, but they'll encounter some pushback, he added. Civilian and noncivilian agencies by necessity have dissimilar approaches to IT and there may be friction between agency chiefs and the White House, according to George. "There will be some resistance, but we've found smart policy changes will always trump legacy thinking," he says.

The economic crisis also heightened CIOs' stature. Slow economic growth pushes organizations to make major IT investments to streamline operations, changing how they interact with the public. Chief information officers and private sector partners have to be at the core of those efforts, George says. The \$787 billion economic stimulus plan is an example, in which the Obama administration earmarked \$19 billion to continue efforts to build a nationwide system of interoperable electronic medical records. An array of projects within that portfolio are aimed at increasing efficiency, accountability and cost savings within the health care system. Agency CIOs and technology vendors will be integral to the effort, George says.

"There's a lot of money floating around and lots of people jockeying to get some of the money," says IT consultant Laurie Orlov. "Agencies who deal with health care have to be sitting up and taking notice of all those billions."

CIOs should have a hand in determining how the funds are going to be disbursed to IT vendors, health care providers and others, says Orlov. Besides Recovery.gov, the government's main site for monitoring stimulus spending, agencies are standing up their own accountability apparatuses.

ROCK STARS NEEDED

CIOs have all sorts of backgrounds and different ways of doing business, but a certain personality type probably felt at ease with Team Obama from the beginning. Orlov describes this executive as "the BlackBerry-toting, Twittering, social networking CIO who gets the populist appeal of technology." Other CIOs, who view their work as more administrative and view IT as a cost rather than as part of an agency's strategic mission, might not be as comfortable.

Nevertheless, the number of technology thought leaders in government likely will increase,

she says, as the business world becomes less attractive during the economic crisis. Private sector CIOs and IT experts could defect to more stable government jobs bringing with them industry know-how. "Government can learn a great deal from the private sector," Orlov says. "The most effective CIOs out there understand their role is influencing the business process, not implementing IT systems."

Former Social Security Administration CIO Tom Hughes says the visibility of chief information officers could improve, but for now he's more comfortable holding on to skepticism. "Nothing has changed yet. I haven't seen a single rock star hired and that's disappointing," says Hughes, now a government consultant. "The administration has to hire the right people and position them successfully within agencies and give them the authority."

The federal CIO job, he says, should be a role in which the top technology executive can shepherd good projects and stop bad ones. Guidance should come from the federal CIO Council, which was not utilized effectively under the Bush administration, according to Hughes. The council needs to "re-engage and become a full participant and partner with OMB," he says.

Karen Evans, Kundra's predecessor at OMB, aimed to improve IT management in the government, but she "drove [both organizations] like a trail master," Hughes says. Changing that culture of engagement in the council would require CIOs to become more active in agencies' higher echelons of senior management. But some CIOs will be reluctant to insist they be included, he says.

To encourage the change, agency chiefs must endorse the important strategic role their CIOs play. But time is running out for the Obama administration in making CIOs, and IT, more strategic. "The longer it takes to bring the right people on board the more the die is cast in terms of relegating CIOs to the same positions they have been in," he says.

CONGRESS TAKES NOTICE

Congress has ideas on how CIOs can improve agencies' missions. In April, Sen. Thomas Carper, D-Del., chairman of the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Federal Financial Management Subcommittee, introduced a bill that requires greater accountability for IT cost overruns. It calls for creating a Web site that would be updated quarterly with details about the price, schedule and performance of agencies' priciest projects, and would require CIOs to formulate a strategy for improving technology acquisition, planning and project management.

The bill would call on OMB to prescribe guidelines for agencies, and agency heads would have to submit annual reports to Congress detailing their IT accomplishments. The proposal, which has the backing of Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Chairman Joseph Lieberman, I-Conn., and ranking member Susan Collins, R-Maine, also would form a tiger team of private sector, nonprofit, and federal research and development experts to oversee IT projects.

Carper unveiled his bill at a hearing where Kundra and Evans testified. At the hearing, Kundra said the White House was planning changes to a pair of OMB technology watch lists that flag projects that need high-level attention. The lists are a legacy of the 1996 Clinger-Cohen Act, which required agencies to submit business plans for IT investments to OMB. Kundra said he wants to augment the registries to ensure "we're not just looking at lagging indicators but leading indicators." He said after the hearing that his aim is to "understand, dissect and distill what's going on with IT spending."

Evans said the government might have to revise laws that predate the high-tech revolution. "Dragging the 60-year-old Administrative Procedures Act into the Internet age is highlighting the gulf between today's Internet-driven expectation of instant communications and instant response with the purposefully slow-moving and deliberative processes prescribed by the APA," she said.

CIOs, Evans said, must meet all their obligations, from privacy and security to records management: "They should not and cannot pick and choose."

Andrew Noyes is a reporter for National Journal's CongressDaily.

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