

Data Discussion Dominates NASCIO Day One

Steve Towns | Elaine Pittman | September 29, 2014



The National Association of State CIOs kicked off its annual conference in Nashville Monday, Sept. 29, focusing on big data, open data and the ever increasing complexity of issues facing government leaders.

Author Rebecca Costa set the tone for the day with a keynote focused on the intersection of technology, public policy and human biology. Costa, a sociobiologist, contends that the amount of data available to decision-makers is multiplying so quickly that it outstrips society's capacity to process it.

"We're operating on a very small subset of information at any particular time — and that subset is getting smaller all the time," she said. "Complexity makes facts and knowledge very difficult to acquire."

Costa contends that gaps between rapid change and the capacity of a civilization to adapt have occurred throughout history, often with disastrous results. "When societies become too complex, beliefs tend to dominate, and we become susceptible to false leaders who will make complex decisions for us."

Big data, advances in neuroscience and robotics, and better mobile access hold the keys for adapting to this new environment, she said. “We need to use technology to help us with the gap between complexity and knowledge.”

To varying degrees, the discussion throughout day one of the NASCIO conference focused on the growing importance of data. Here are some of the highlights.

Time for Action — Mark Headd, former chief data officer for Philadelphia, urged CIOs to embrace open data. He said governments were too slow to deploy online services during the dawn of e-commerce and warned that they shouldn’t make the same mistake with open data. “I was in state government when the Internet was catching on and fundamentally changing how we provide services,” said Headd, who is now chief evangelist for mobile app provider Accela. “I remember feeling like we were always trying to catch up. We’re still dealing with the baggage of not getting ahead of that change.”

Now governments have arrived at the same make-or-break moment with open data. “We have an opportunity to get ahead of where this is going,” he said. “The future is data.”

Open Data: More Than a Buzzword? — While numerous governments have been moving to release their data sets to the public and create online information portals, nearly one-third of attendees said open data is a buzzword and they’re unsure of its value. But that doesn’t mean all agencies are idly standing by: The open data movement has found ground in the 38 states and 46 cities that currently have a form of a portal. Of the attendees polled, 13 percent said their department or agency uses open data to provide quality services for external customers like citizens and businesses, while 56 percent are working to get to that point. Alan Shark, CEO of the Public Technology Institute, said over the years, government’s goal with open data has moved away from hoping that developers will create apps. Now, according to a poll during the session, the best possible outcome from open data was tied between improving data-driven decision-making, improving citizen engagement and improving government effectiveness.

Stay the Course — With the future of 36 governors up in the air this November, Costa called out a number most IT officials would likely want to forget: On average, CIOs and CTOs spend 32 months on the job. And that’s a figure she would like to see change. Costa, Monday’s keynote speaker, said that because it takes so long to build up IT infrastructure, governors who replace a state’s head tech chiefs should not be elected. “Technology has nothing to do with politics,” she said, “it has to do with the delivery of public policy.”

High Achievers – At an awards reception Sunday night, e.Republic’s Center for Digital Government recognized the highest achieving states in the 2014 Digital States Survey. Commandeering Nashville honky tonk Second Fiddle for the evening, Center Executive Director Todd Sander handed out awards to CIOs from Michigan, Utah and Missouri for [earning the survey’s only A grades](#). Sander also [recognized seven states](#) for excelling in specific program areas and two states for making the survey’s biggest improvement.

<http://www.govtech.com/data/Data-Discussion-Dominates-NASCIO-Day-One.html>