Attention on 18F: The Bridge to Modern Government is Built from Both Sides

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Twenty-first-century government is faced with complexities that couldn't be imagined 50 years ago, but some of the systems running government IT have passed that mark. The problem is that modern engineering practice in the private sector has evolved to deliver services that taxpayers now expect from every agency website. Transitioning legacy systems is a complex problem, and at the moment, we are falling short as a country. Seventy-one percent of our $51 billion non-defense IT projects in the next 12 months will be spent on maintaining outdated legacy systems.

With the establishment of the U.S. Digital Service (USDS) and 18F in 2014, President Obama hoped to address the challenge of transitioning legacy IT systems to modern services. That act planted the seeds for a new approach — one that builds toward a smarter, more nimble government that does more for less.

While there appears to be a consensus among policymakers that there is a need for 21st-century government, this new approach may be causing a stir. A little over a

month ago, a congressional hearing was held to examine the role and effectiveness of USDS and 18F. At that hearing, concerns were raised about 18F's role in purchasing new technology for government use and questioned if there was a potential conflict of interest. But what's troublesome about this is that those concerns were raised by organizations representing the very companies that build and maintain the legacy technology our government uses every day.

The attention on the role of 18F obscures the larger issue: Modernizing legacy systems is not isolated to public agencies. CIOs in private and public sectors face this challenge all the time. Despite a commitment to building a 21st-century technology company or agency, complex change can easily feel like choosing between the devil you know versus the devil you don't. Often, in the name of avoiding short-term risk, the choice is made to double down on outdated legacy IT, incurring the cost of retrofitting and ultimately delivering less-than-stellar service to customers and American citizens.

We need to recognize the scale and urgency of the problem. You can find this recognition in testimony given before Congress this past May by David A. Powner, the director of Information Technology Management Issues for the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), the government agency that oversees the use of public funds. The title of his testimony was, "Federal Agencies Need to Address Aging Legacy Systems." The combination of shrinking budgets and rising technology costs requires that we do more with less and calls for a new approach.

The good news is there are a growing number of projects demonstrating a commitment to delivering to the U.S. taxpayer using modern technology development. Beyond the 18 million (and counting) people receiving health-care coverage via HealthCare.gov, veterans will get improved delivery of benefits through vets.gov, and there is the cost savings for Department of Homeland Security:

"The United States Digital Service (USDS) supported the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) transition to electronic filings to renew or replace green cards and pay certain immigration fees. Closing down the legacy Electronic Immigration System (ELIS) will save the Department of Homeland Security $33 million a year in ongoing operations, maintenance, and licensing costs." — President Obama's Fiscal 2017 Budget

In addition, we've had the good fortune of working alongside members of the tech surge that saved HealthCare.gov in 2013 and 2014. These individuals used that experience to build USDS, 18F, and a host of emerging tech companies and organizations like Ad Hoc, Nava, Nuna, Truss and Code for America. This leadership is not just within the private sector; we worked elbow to elbow with engineers, managers and executives within the agency willing to learn new methods and share strategies because they were equally motivated to deliver great results.

This is the promise of modern, 21st-century government: technical ability, modern infrastructure, iterative and agile development, and customer focus, coupled with pragmatic collaboration with agencies, side-by-side, to solve complex problems for our citizens.

The official GAO audit of USDS and 18F will be delivered this month, and we welcome their findings. Routinely measuring and examining the impact of government agencies is critical to ensuring taxpayer dollars are used in a way that's worthy of the people who work every single day to earn them. But what we should also recognize is that we live in a "post-waterfall" era, and working toward a solution requires changing processes and definitions of success to match our current era — not 2006, not 1996 and certainly not 1966.

Transitioning from legacy systems to modern infrastructure is a complex, non-trivial task. We also know there are leaders in agencies, modern engineering, and even larger companies who are up to the challenge of measuring the impact of their projects. After all, transparency and focus on results are the core of modern technology development.

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