

## Putting the 'I' in CIO (Opinion)

Steve Towns | August 23, 2012

I'm writing this a few days after attending the Center for Digital Government's Industry Summit, an event designed to give government contractors a bird's-eye view of technology trends and requirements in the public sector. A panel of eight state and local government CIOs spent the day taking on a wide range of topics, and one message came through crystal clear: The world is changing rapidly for public CIOs and the people who work for them.

Based on their comments, it may be time to put the government data center on the endangered species list. Most panelists said they're pushing systems into the cloud wherever they can and as quickly as possible. Colorado CIO Kristin Russell expects to shift 30,000 state employees to Google's hosted Gmail service by this fall. "The cloud is the only salvation the public sector has from an IT standpoint," Russell said, citing the difficulty of owning, operating and maintaining large complex systems in the public sector.

Austin, Texas, CIO Steve Elkins said the city is poised to move out of its data center, adding: "We won't build a new one. We'll look at the cloud, co-location or other options."

And Philadelphia CIO Adel Ebeid said he's put the brakes on large IT development projects. "We want to get to a place very soon where we're buying services, not hardware and software," he said. "CIOs focused on building data centers are going to miss the opportunity to do some really strategic things."

One impact of this trend is a seismic shift in the sort of skills needed by government IT agencies. Public-sector IT jobs aren't going away — but they won't be the same. Operational tasks like server management and software development will give way to positions focused on vendor management and data analytics.

But not everyone's ready to pull the plug on their data center. California CIO Carlos Ramos said the state is boosting its data center capacity in order to host services for struggling local governments. "The locals need someplace to land," he said, "especially for applications dealing with sensitive data."

And Ramos wasn't the only CIO on the panel looking to share more resources between governments. Colorado is one of four states working on a common unemployment insurance system, said Russell, noting that — somewhat surprisingly — the project has been well received by both the federal government and the vendor community. That, in itself, may be an indication of how rapidly some of these new ideas are becoming business as usual for public CIOs.

"The 'I' in CIO is changing from 'information' and 'infrastructure' to 'innovation,'" said Ebeid. "Today, I spend 40 to 50 percent of my time on things like social entrepreneurship, building thriving local tech communities and civic engagement."

One thing is certain: Hidebound concepts and old-school approaches are being challenged routinely. And that's changing the landscape for government IT leaders and the people they employ. Hang onto your hats everyone. Look into the future a few years, and you may have trouble recognizing your own industry ... and much of your workforce.

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