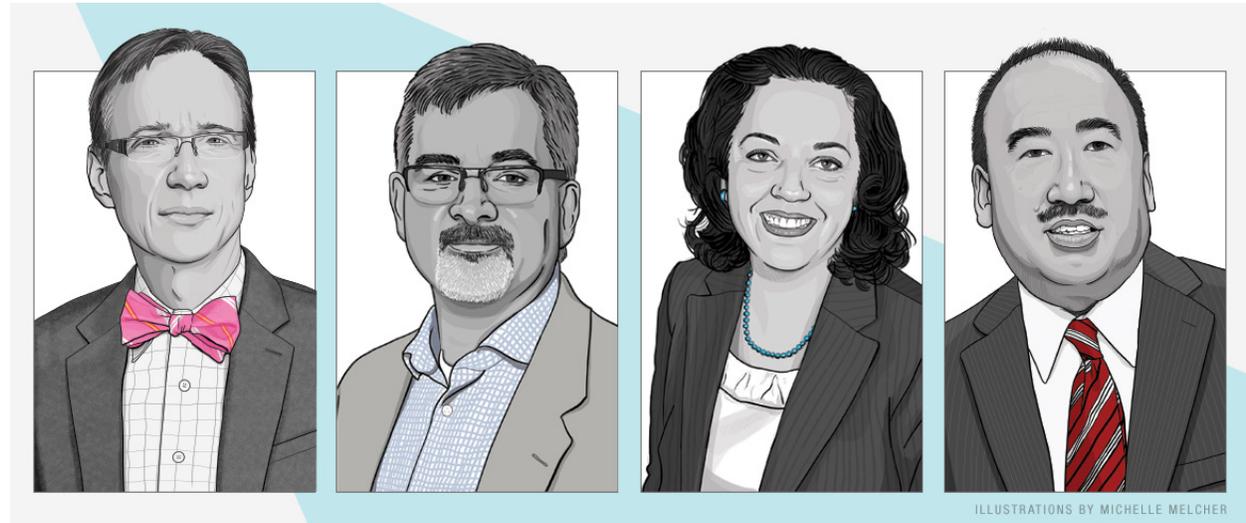


4 Public CIOs Leading in the Limelight

Adam Stone | June 15, 2015



For a public CIO, sometimes the key word is “public.” Those in the upper echelons of government IT leadership often fly below the radar — but not always. Like other civic officials, they sometimes come under scrutiny, especially when their projects are big, pricey and highly visible.

When they implement new systems, CIOs gamble with their reputations and their jobs (and even their sanity, if lack of sleep contributes). It’s not just a matter of getting the work done. Often the pressures go well beyond the technology, with public exposure demanding heightened levels of excellence and a skeptical media publishing tough critiques.

Here are four CIOs who’ve run the gauntlet; those who’ve led highly visible projects and learned to cope with life in the spotlight.



CIO, Louisiana

Consolidate all Louisiana's executive branch cabinet agencies under a single IT umbrella? Dickie Howze is on board with it.

"We've always been challenged with looking for ways to identify efficiencies and to reduce the cost of day-to-day operations," he said. "So when this idea was presented to me, I knew without a doubt that we could use it to become more efficient."

With 36 years in public service, including extensive IT work in the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services, Howze was recruited into his present job specifically to oversee the consolidation effort, something he'd already done in his previous post. Here the stakes were a little higher, though, and the heat a little hotter.

In August 2013 the watchdog site LouisianaVoice.com charged that leaders of the consolidation project were merely trying to "project an appearance of propriety" with their RFP. The article alleged that "possibly hundreds — maybe more than 1,000 — of state IT employees will be losing their jobs as a result of the new contract."

That particular jab saddled Howze with some work early on, work that went beyond pure IT.

"My first concern was communication with the staff. When people hear the word 'consolidation,' the first thought is: 'They are going to lay me off,'" he said. With the project under the public microscope and questions already being raised about future workforce levels, Howze moved quickly, meeting early on with all 700-plus employees within the executive branch.

"My message to them was: 'We need you working with us for this initiative. We are not going to cut the workforce or lay anybody off as a result of this activity,'" he said. "My commitment was to communicate with them so they would know what we were doing every step of the way."

The consolidation is only one of several very high-profile moves to roll out under Howze's leadership. Since coming on board, he also has reshaped his office into a service organization, one that charges client agencies for the services it provides, rather than shouldering costs using its own budget.

Here again he's had a hill to climb in selling the merits of this new model. "It was a big task to manage, to make sure the customer understood how this was going to work."

Being at the center of such big-league changes prompted Howze to adapt his own leadership approach. Bigger projects, bigger playing field — all these drive the need for a bigger way of seeing things.

"Back in the day, in information technology, everybody did their own thing. We made our own decisions," said Howze. Here in the limelight, you've got to bring everyone on board from the outset. "The biggest task to manage is in making sure the customer understands how all of this is going to work."



CIO, Orlando, Fla.

In 2012 Orlando, Fla., issued a massive \$8.7 million contract to Workday for software to drive its human resource, financial management and procurement functions. While the city referred to it as a “negotiated procurement,” the media preferred the less flattering and more controversial term “no bid.”

A story in the Orlando Sentinel slammed the move, quoting an anonymous vendor who said, “[t]he statement that no one else can provide this is totally false. ... At the end of the day, I don’t mind losing. But I mind being cheated out of my chance to compete.”

Public scrutiny? It gets better. The same story noted that on the day the City Council signed off on the deal, “Orlando’s chief financial officer flew to Las Vegas for Workday’s annual conference and signed the contract before a cheering crowd. Seven other City Hall officials joined Orlando CFO Rebecca Sutton at the conference, at a total cost to taxpayers of \$22,049.”

Among those delegates was CIO Rosa Akhtarkhavari, who bristles at the implied accusation. “We worked every waking hour during those days, attending interactive sessions and meeting with other professional individuals who had led their Workday implementations and were willing to share their experiences and lessons learned,” she said.

Publicly, Akhtarkhavari is apt to let the public affairs office handle press inquiries. Privately, her feeling about the media’s jeering is concise: “If I wanted to go on a vacation, Vegas would be the last place I would pick.”

Having served 23 years in the public sector, Akhtarkhavari said she wasn't surprised by the media's jabs, but merely disappointed. This upgrade was urgently needed, after all. But while she may take umbrage at the intrusiveness of the press, her approach is a pragmatic one. Rather than respond directly to negative public scrutiny, she prefers to let the work speak for itself.

"From the moment this project began, our group was focused on delivering the right solutions," she said. "Our emphasis and activities centered on what was needed to ensure a successful implementation, regardless of how difficult. Doing the right thing was what mattered most."

As for those highly visible gripes about the award process, the quality of the work helps Akhtarkhavari to shrug them off. Any large project will draw some criticism, but as long as she is enjoying her work and making a difference, the rest doesn't trouble her.



Rob St. John

Director, Washington State Consolidated Technology Services Agency

Look, none of this was Rob St. John's fault. He wasn't even there.

St. John came on board as director of the Consolidated Technology Services Agency in Washington state in 2013, well after the decision had been made to migrate a broad range of state agencies into a single new State Data Center (SDC).

While all tenants of the old state data center have successfully moved over to the new SDC, St. John still gets calls from people with complaints about the plan. Many

questioned building a mammoth new facility just as better technology and cloud computing were shrinking the need for data center space. “I don’t mind being in the public eye; I don’t mind answering tough questions,” he said. “ But it does get a little frustrating to constantly be asked the same distracting questions, the same revisionist questions.”

The reality St. John tries to convey is that the data center’s two main halls are now 70 percent occupied by state agencies’ systems and data, leaving a comfortable margin for future growth. It’s true that neither of the center’s other two halls have been built out; nor have these empty shells been occupied by tenants. But they made up just 6 percent of the project budget and they cost literally nothing to operate each month. Hardly a crisis, said St. John. But he still gets calls of query and complaint.

St. John has spent much of his 30-year career in the public sector, mostly in the Department of Social and Health Services, where his jobs ranged from a direct client services role to the CIO’s desk. The data center project has been different because of its size and visibility.

“What’s wrong with the Washington State Data Center?” That was the ZDNet headline in December 2014. The story went on to suggest that half the space in the new building might be best used as a glorified filing cabinet for confidential notes — i.e., a paper warehouse.

St. John copes by presenting the facts, including what he considers some very sound reasons for why no one has taken the shell space. This is an earthquake zone, with expensive power and few major corporate employers. Hardly a tempting proposition to potential data center tenants.

To keep the facts visible, St. John’s office maintains all project data on its external website and the team meets regularly with the customer group. As for the bad press, St. John rarely troubles himself to fire back. Rather than address specific criticisms, “we keep talking about the facts, and don’t focus too much on the folks who may be pushing their own political agenda,” he said.

While the high-profile nature of the project does make the phone ring periodically, St. John doesn’t let it become a distraction. “ It does crop up occasionally, but it’s not a focus here. We focus on the project, which is a big, complex thing,” he said. “The fact is: Here we are. It is time to move past it. The building is here. Now let’s utilize it.”



Jeff Uyeda

Executive Partner, Financial Information System for California (Fi \$Cal)

In the realm of massive and highly visible public IT projects, FI\$CAL ranks high. Formally known as the Financial Information System for California, the program is

working to pull together 2,500 independent legacy financial systems in use across 124 departments to create a single, central financial platform for the state.

These are mission-critical systems that touch upon budgeting, accounting, procurement and cash management. It's one of the biggest such overhauls in the nation, and it has drawn unflattering media attention.

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In his varied accounting and administrative roles through the years, he has been largely a behind-the-scenes guy, and he readily acknowledges that the very high-profile nature of FI\$CAL impacts how he does his job.

"I am aware of it," said Uyeda. "I know that for this project to go forward successfully, we have to address every audience, the user base and the partner base — everybody who is out there."

Public perception matters to Uyeda, and it isn't always easy to manage: The media has not always been friendly to this project. In February 2014, for instance, the website Allgov.com pretty much raked his project over the coals. At that time a state audit had found FI\$CAL to be a year behind schedule and 9 percent over its \$616.8 million budget. The story said the performance of outside contractor Accenture wasn't up to snuff.

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Uyeda's most significant strategy for surviving the tribulations of life in the public eye has been to tell people up front that the world is imperfect. "On any large technology project, you are going to have speed bumps. So a lot of it is education. What has to be communicated is that this is not a catastrophe. Whatever 'this' is, we will get over it."

<http://www.govtech.com/pcio/articles/4-Public-CIOs-Leading-in-the-Limelight.html>