

Washington State CIO Leading Agencies on New Path

Brian Heaton | June 18, 2012



Bharat Shyam walked into a [turbulent situation](#) last year when he took the job as Washington state's CIO. The state's information services agency had been replaced by three different technology-related departments and a controversial new data center stood mostly unoccupied.

But thanks to a detailed strategic plan and a little patience, [Shyam](#) is addressing the Evergreen State's technology woes.

In February, Shyam's office released a [strategy document](#) that laid out a modernization path for Washington state's computing investments. From emphasizing employee accountability to embracing software as a service, Shyam outlined a series of goals centered on short-term fixes and long-term changes that he believes will improve and fortify the state's technology presence.



Cloud adoption is one of the areas Shyam believes Washington is beginning to make strides in. Although not yet in widespread use, some agencies are dabbling with cloud services where appropriate. For example, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife is testing a cloud-based application that allows employees to inspect and take photos of whatever animal is being caught, killed or hunted. The application is GPS-enabled, and the data is uploaded to a website. The state is also examining cloud-based email.

“We are actively looking at Microsoft Office 365 as a solution for our email, and I will very likely have some of our agencies on it,” said Shyam, who spent 18 years working for Microsoft Corp. He added that he’s kept a close watch on Minnesota’s move to the platform this year. “[But] we have not signed a contract yet.”

Although movement on various fronts is happening, Shyam said baby steps are necessary before making any firm commitments. For example, Shyam revealed that Washington state doesn’t yet have a mobile strategy or management infrastructure, and thus can’t support the bring-your-own-device philosophy that’s becoming more common in the public sector.

“I am a firm believer that we have to experiment before you make bets,” Shyam said, regarding investment in new technology.

The state is also continuing to populate its new data center and office complex. Located in Olympia, Wash., the \$255 million project features 55,000 square feet of data center floor space. The project was hammered last year by legislators and watchdog groups after a report claimed that only 4,000 feet of space was actually needed by the state. The office building portion of the complex is functioning, but the data center still isn’t live. Shyam admitted that there were issues plaguing the project. He explained the state built out more data center space than was necessary, due to a lack of awareness about the way virtualization increases density and decreases the need for physical space.

Logistics and staffing changes in the centralized computing environment have to be worked out before the power is switched on, Shyam said. The state expects to light up its data center at some point in 2012, he said.

Private Versus Public

According to a [statement](#) from Washington Gov. Chris Gregoire last year, Shyam's last position with the software provider was as general manager of Windows Azure, Microsoft's cloud platform. Before that, he was a software engineer for the company, working on both the Windows operating system and Internet Explorer Web browser.

With that long history in the private sector, Shyam said he expected to find a completely different organizational structure and work culture when he went to work for the state. He was surprised, however, to find that culture was the more familiar aspect of his new surroundings.

The biggest differences, he said, were getting used to even the smallest meetings becoming public information and the shift in responsibility.

"I went from being a person who spent their entire career building products and services to someone whose primary responsibility is to buy the right products, so this is different than product development and IT," Shyam said.

"So the diversity of what someone in a large IT organization role has to think about was a big revelation for me in terms of how much is going on everywhere," he added.

One thing Shyam said he'd like to improve is the education and training of the state's IT personnel. He explained that in the private sector an emphasis is placed on staying on top of the newest technology developments and enhancing an employee's knowledge.

But over the past seven months, Shyam said he's observed that isn't as great of a push for IT training in the public sector. Even though technology budgets are continuing to be cut, Shyam argued that public IT employees need to be as current as their private-sector peers on the latest trends and developments.

He said there should be a couple of conferences each year that his team members get to attend in order to stay in-tune with what's happening in the private sector.

"I personally find that this is such a sensitive issue that I will go to all the conferences completely on my own and not charge the state a single dime. But I can't expect that from all our IT managers," Shyam said. "That is a major concern — and I don't know how to make the case and lead the way in front of the citizenry so they don't take it as government employees 'living it up.'"