



Perspectives

Where does innovation start for you? By Michael Donovan

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I've had the pleasure to serve as CIO for state agencies, as deputy state CIO overseeing government enterprise technology planning and strategy, and as president and CEO of a technology company serving state-government clients.

In each of these capacities, I thought a lot about innovation and dealt with a lot of technology. While perspectives on innovation differed from agency to agency and role to role, I can tell you there was one important constant: Success with innovation isn't all about technology; it's about understanding the business and finding the right people to solve the challenge or capture the opportunity facing your business. Only then can you apply the right technology to enable success.

When I was the CIO of a large state transportation department, the agency was keenly interested in gaining value-added insights from the wealth of data the agency collected. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology was the "innovation de jour." We could have simply bought a GIS system "off the shelf." But anybody could have done that. What's more, its implementation most likely would have fallen far short of our agency's needs—or worse, failed.

Instead, **we started with people, the most critical part of the innovation equation.**

At the time, the agency's map-making department was being downsized, so I arranged to have their staff join our IT team. Not because I wanted to make maps. But because they had the exact experience needed to help the agency envision the "art of the possible" with respect to GIS and its application to agency business needs. Their understanding of agency operations and their knowledge of this innovative technology uniquely positioned this team as the nucleus of a GIS Center of Excellence. That center supported users across the agency in leveraging innovative GIS technology to improve their business processes and enhance delivery of service to constituents.

Absent clear business drivers and champions, technology for technology's sake is often a recipe for failure. Well-intentioned IT organizations, with their keen interest in technology, can easily fall prey to acquiring the latest technology, which then becomes just another "new hammer in search of a nail." With its intimate knowledge of agency operations and close collaboration with users, our GIS team had a line of sight into the challenges faced by agency leadership well before we acquired innovation-enabling technology. They understood, for example, how difficult it was for our commissioner to quickly and accurately answer legislators' questions about planned and ongoing highway and bridge projects. The team's first application of this innovative technology put that data at the commissioner's fingertips in an easy-to-use visual format, turning him into a GIS champion and driving adoption across the agency at an accelerated pace.

Fast forward to today. Everyone is talking about the need to embrace innovation. The challenges facing state CIOs today are much more complex and the technology solutions more sophisticated than what I had to work with. (Think cloud, mobility, cyber security threats, even blockchain.) Moreover, citizens want the same user experience they get in the retailing and e-commerce space, with more convenient access to government services 24/7 on their mobile devices. All this at a time when governments face growing pressure to do more with less. So, meeting heightened citizen expectations for ready access to an expanding portfolio of services is yet another significant challenge.

There's no silver bullet. **My best advice is to resist the notion that innovation is synonymous with buying the latest technology.**

Instead, take a holistic approach that starts with the critical elements of the business—people and process. In my state CIO roles, I found my most impactful innovation involved changing my business model to “right source” my IT services (e.g., in-source services core to agency business; outsource everything else). That, in turn, freed-up valuable IT resources to help our business units define and implement their own innovation strategies. Today, most CIOs look to gain tremendous efficiencies and economy—and even greater capability—by implementing cloud solutions for certain in-house processes.

Looking back at my time as a government CIO, I can say we were figuring things out as we went along. It was a wonderful learning experience, but it took time and we made mistakes. Our approach back then was to take your best shot, fail fast, learn from the experience, and quickly try again.

Today, with customer expectations higher, with the technology more complex, and with the requirements for talent more specialized, the stakes are greater. The trial-and-error approach just doesn't cut it anymore.

Nevertheless, I believe my philosophy still holds. Building that foundation for success has little to do with technology; it starts with a sharp focus on the critical elements of the business—people and process.

Looking back, what I would have wanted wasn't so much new or more advanced technology—I think what we had was right for the time. But I do wish I had an experienced trusted advisor to help guide me along the way. Insights about innovative approaches and solutions that worked (or didn't work) for government entities elsewhere in the United States or around the globe would have added tremendous value to our efforts to innovate more quickly and successfully.

To paraphrase Eleanor Roosevelt, “It's important to learn from others, because we can't live long enough to figure it all out ourselves.”



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About Perspectives

Perspectives is a published series by KPMG's State and Local government practice, providing insights and points of view from KPMG partners and professionals that once held the position of CIO in government.

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