

Federal IT Leaders and Their Strategies

Highlights from a Roundtable hosted by the Advanced Technology Academic Research Center (ATARC) in partnership with Lumen, March 2024

This roundtable discussion brought together federal IT leaders to explore critical topics shaping government technology. Network transformation, cybersecurity, generative AI, and culture change drove the conversation as panelists exchanged best practices and strategies for navigating a rapidly evolving landscape.

Network Transformation and Security

Many agencies are faced with the complex challenge of operating in multi-cloud hybrid environments, while simultaneously contending with aging infrastructure. The demands of modern technology simply cannot be met by legacy infrastructure.

Agencies must embrace network transformation to enable the agile flow of data required to fuel the digitization and modernization of federal operations. To combat rapidly evolving threats, security must be embedded into the network to allow for early threat mitigation.

According to one panelist, true integration of security in the network represents a revolutionary transformation, not merely an upgrade. By addressing threats directly at the network level, agencies will significantly reduce reliance on vulnerability patching and endpoint protection on individual devices.

Generative AI Adoption

While it's unrealistic to expect agencies to innovate solutions in the same ways as private companies, agencies can focus on adapting existing AI solutions to solve their unique problems. Doing so allows agencies to dedicate resources towards addressing more complex challenges.

Panelists note that for successful AI integration, both individual and functional adoption are key. Individuals must intentionally integrate AI into their daily workflows to start establishing usage patterns. This, combined with the functional application of AI to certain operations, like customer service, can lead to real transformation within an organization.

Leaders carry the responsibility of ensuring ethical AI use without hampering employees' ability to work effectively. For one panelist, the goal is to position AI as a copilot for the federal government.

“You just don't transform a company. You must get people to do things differently. It's not about the technology. It's not about the process. It's about people.”

Workforce Development and Culture Change

Panelists discussed strategies to ensure the successful adoption of technology within agencies. These include:

- **Lead by example.** Having organizational leaders model the use of new tools sets the tone and encourages broader acceptance of new technology.
- **Facilitate behavior change.** Leaders must actively work to facilitate a shift in established work patterns for technology adoption to be successful.
- **Create space for change.** Ensuring employees have the capacity to incorporate change into their work day is critical for technology adoption. Leaders should clearly communicate what employees should stop doing in order to create room for new practices.

“The definition of culture has the word ritual in it. If you don't change the culture, it's over. Your employees will go back to the rituals they had in place.”

For many agencies, changing workplace culture is the most challenging aspect of technology adoption. Panelists who have been successful with changing workplace culture started by addressing business-related challenges. Once employees felt heard and received supportive resources, collaborative problem solving came more easily. Panelists also credit professional development as a means to improve internal communication.

Enterprise Solutions

Aligning enterprise-level services with the specific needs of individual agencies presents a challenge for many IT leaders. To achieve balance between enterprise and bureau-level services, panelists recommend proactively communicating processes and progress to stakeholders at all levels.

It's also important for agencies to align available enterprise solutions with business objectives. In the future, leaders hope for a catalog of solutions that agencies can reference in collaboration with engineers to choose a solution tailored to their specific business needs. However, panelists note that to introduce an enterprise solution, it must be exceptional and provide an overall superior experience compared to existing tools or processes.

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