

Harnessing Innovation and Technology in Public Service: A Conversation with Steven VanRoekel, Chief Innovation Officer, USAID



Today's challenging times underscore the need for innovation and efficiency in government. Information technology enables government agencies to deliver mission-based services to customers; in this case, the American people. The Obama administration has been focused on harnessing the power of technology to improve the operations of government and deliver better services to the American people. Recent advances in technology, such as cloud computing and collaborative modular information technology (IT) development are transforming how services are delivered and consumed.

Steven VanRoekel, in his former role as U.S. chief information officer and administrator, Office of Electronic Government, Office of Management and Budget (OMB) played an integral role in shaping and changing the way U.S. government agencies do information technology. I originally spoke with Steve on The Business of Government Hour a few weeks before he moved from the Office of Management and Budget as federal CIO to his role as USAID chief innovation officer and senior advisor to that agency's administrator. Steve lends his insight, expertise, and leadership to USAID's Ebola response, combating the worst outbreak in 40 years. I caught up with Steve a couple months after joining USAID.

Steve reflects on his tenure as federal CIO; specifically, on the challenges faced, the opportunities seized, the innovations pursued, and the work to be done to facilitate innovation and advance the use of technology in public service. He also offers a snapshot in time about his work at USAID.
— Michael J. Keegan

On Challenges Faced as Federal CIO

I came to the administration from the private sector. Having this perspective shapes the way I see the challenges being faced in federal IT:

- **Pace of Technological Change and Government Culture.** The culture and systems in government aren't set up to keep pace with the dynamic changes in technology. This is a big challenge of thinking about how government can better keep pace with technology trends.



- **Government Attracting the Best Talent.** Along with keeping up with the pace of technological change, the government must find ways to attract and hire the best technical people ... so figuring out how government can be competitive in this space is a really big challenge.
- **Government Budget Cycle and IT.** The government budget cycle also presents a significant challenge when attempting to implement technology in a somewhat turbulent environment. The three significant challenges center on the timing of how budgets are done, the pace of technology, and the federal agency's ability to hire the right talent to do technology.

On Politics and Governance

The thing that surprised me the most coming into government was the difference between politics and public service. When

you're on the West Coast and you're watching the news, you assume that everything you're seeing on these news outlets is about government. Really what they're reporting is politics. When you get into government, you finally realize that there are these dedicated, hardworking, smart people— independent of who is sitting in the White House—who are tirelessly working to produce results for the American people. It's really astounding. It was an incredibly eye-opening experience for me to see that then think about how we are harnessing that talent to go get results in the area of technology.

On Crafting a Smarter IT Agenda

We've taken the federal government on a journey to reduce the growth in federal IT spending, show agency leaders how best to implement technology while actually cutting costs, and using the savings to do new things. We've reached an inflection point at which the journey goes from a focus on efficiency to that of effectiveness. Therefore, smarter IT delivery is first and foremost about effectiveness. How are we driving the effectiveness of the programs that we initiated? How are agencies meeting their core missions and objectives through the smart use of technology?'

The administration's first term efforts largely focused on establishing mechanisms to stop out-of-control IT spending, and promoting new technologies, such as cloud computing and mobile technology. The administration also focused on opening up federal data for private sector use, enhancing cyber capabilities, and deploying federal technology as a tool to increase efficiency, thus allowing government to do more with less. One of the pillars of the president's management agenda is a focus on increasing effectiveness: finding ways to deliver world-class customer service to citizens and businesses. Our current efforts toward smarter IT delivery are a key part of this work.

The smarter IT delivery agenda aims to increase customer satisfaction with top government digital services; decrease the percentage of federal government IT projects that are delayed or over budget; and increase the speed with which we hire and deploy qualified talent to work on government IT projects.

On Outcome Focused Leadership

There are some key principles I've always lived by. First, I am maniacal about defining very, very clear, measurable objectives. Think about what you're trying to accomplish and work your way back from that. What outcome are you trying to drive and work your way back from that? You don't tend to see this happening in government. I think it's



largely driven by the myriad of rules and regulations that exist or by the federal budget cycle. In government, it seems a natural phenomenon to start with the tactics rather than outcomes. What am I going to go do rather than what am I trying to accomplish and how do I get there? If you come up with very, very clear objectives that are measurable and that people understand, the tactics will derive from those objectives. But when a conversation begins with tactics, there is a tendency to get stuck in the weeds and your strategic objectives can get sidetracked. I often use the phrase: "a tactic in search of a strategy" when I'm in meetings. It's important to begin with a strategy and then think about the tactics that can help you get there.

The second principle that I subscribe to is: hire great people. Surround yourself with the smartest people and get out of their way so you can achieve your objectives. It is important to create that vibrancy to achieve and get things done. Your team will feed on that sensibility. It's also important to understand the people around you and their motivations and skills, so you can help them reach their full potential and achieve your objectives.

To complement these principles, I employ another discipline. When I'm faced with a new challenge—a new job, launching a new effort, or product—on my first day I write the press release for my last day. It details what I want to accomplish and how. This discipline helps me think through my purpose, objectives, and how we are going to get there. It also permits me to distinguish properly between the urgent and the important. In this environment, the urgent will get



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the best of us sometimes. We end up spending a lot of our day dealing with urgent things and we take our eye off the ball—off that important outcome we want to achieve.

For me, this tactic of crafting a vision press release helps me think about what I want to get done and how I should spend my time on what needs to get done.

On the Value of OMB’s PortfolioStat Reviews

The PortfolioStat process was really designed as a mechanism to (1) in a very data-driven way gather information about an agency and really shine a light on things that need to be improved for it through these key performance indicators that are sort of built into PortfolioStat. (2) It’s really about a face-to-face aspect. We sit down once a year with the deputy secretary of the agency and all the C-level functions and have a very honest conversation about where they are. PortfolioStat was designed to be evolutionary, so that each year the process could evolve to keep pace with progress.

On Creating the Digital Service

During my tenure, we established a new capacity within OMB called the U.S. Digital Service, which is led by Mikey Dickerson. This service was created to accelerate the pace of change and was conceived as a centralized, world-class capability that is part of the federal CIO team, which is made up of our country’s brightest digital talent. The team will be charged with removing barriers to exceptional government service delivery and remaking the digital experiences that citizens and businesses have with their government. The service will collaborate with agencies to identify gaps in their very capacity to design, develop, and deploy excellent citizen-facing services, and provide oversight and accountability to ensure results. It also has a close partnership with the 18F digital delivery team at the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), and will work side-by-side with agencies to ensure they have the resources and talent needed to deliver great services on time, on spec, on budget, and with optimal user-functionality.

With the launch of the Digital Service, OMB also released two documents to help realize this vision. The first document was Digital Services Playbook, which has 13 steps that we expect agencies to adhere to when delivering digital services. It identifies a series of “plays” drawn from proven private sector best practices to help agencies successfully deliver digital services.

Another tool is the TechFAR, which highlights flexibilities in the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) that can help

DIGITAL SERVICE PLAYS

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| 1. Understand what people need | 7. Bring in experienced teams |
| 2. Address the whole experience, from start to finish | 8. Choose a modern technology stack |
| 3. Make it simple and intuitive | 9. Deploy in a flexible hosting environment |
| 4. Build the service using agile and iterative practices | 10. Automate testing and deployments |
| 5. Structure budgets and contracts to support delivery | 11. Manage security and privacy through reusable processes |
| 6. Assign one leader and hold that person accountable | 12. Use data to drive decisions |
| | 13. Default to open |

agencies implement “plays” in the playbook that would be accomplished with acquisition support. This is an important first step that I think will be a catalyzing moment for the way agencies implement technology. I’m very excited about where this is going to lead us.

On Priorities at USAID

My priorities focus on using technology and innovative approaches to accelerate the way that U.S. foreign aid is given, to assist in making better decisions, and bring American ingenuity and innovation to find new ways to solve the Ebola crisis. We are also looking longer term at how technology can play a role in strengthening health systems in the region to mitigate or prevent crisis like this in the future.

On a Key Challenge Faced at USAID

The key challenge is the unprecedented nature of the Ebola crisis and how that creates an environment where we need to be very agile in our approach. Through better data gathering, we are learning much more about the Ebola crisis and what is working to mitigate it. Our tactics have to evolve faster than the disease moves. In the government, that is not always easy, but we are making incredible progress in beating the disease.

On Leveraging Innovation in Combating Ebola

Our key focus on innovation is calling on American ingenuity to re-imagine the way we approach a crisis like such as the Ebola outbreak. From reinventing the personal protective equipment suits that care workers wear to developing new rapid diagnostic tools or implementing device and connectivity strategies, the U.S. is stepping up to tackle this crisis.



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On Making a Lasting Impression

Traveling to Liberia and meeting the Liberian people left a lasting impression on me. Even in the midst of this crisis, they have a positive, long-term attitude and I am confident they will once again be a rising star for the continent.

On Public Service

The impact you can have in government—to drive positive outcomes for Americans or people around the world—is just unlimited. It is a life adventure like no other. You can be at the forefront of shaping policy, and history in a sense. It’s thinking about: How do we harness our resources? How do we harness technology and innovation to maximize that impact? That’s why I’m here and when I talk to tech people about coming to join the government, this making a difference and having an impact is what lights the fire in them to come onboard.

On Moving to USAID to Become Chief Innovation Officer and Senior Advisor

After three years, my tenure nearly twice as long as my predecessor, I was ready to leave my position in the White House. My plan was to take some time off and spend it with my family. That plan changed. As the world was in the midst of an unprecedented crisis with Ebola, I knew I couldn’t leave, so I joined USAID to help. This new role builds on something I’ve done my entire career—driving impact through technology and innovation. At USAID, we have the opportunity to do that in a very direct way. ■

To learn more about Steve’s work you can go to www.whitehouse.gov/issues/technology and www.usaid.gov/ebola.



To hear *The Business of Government Hour’s* interview with Steven VanRoekel, go to the Center’s website at www.businessofgovernment.org.



To download the show as a podcast on your computer or MP3 player, from the Center’s website at www.businessofgovernment.org, right click on an audio segment, select Save Target As, and save the file.



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