

Kathy Conrad

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By Michael J. Keegan

Expanding the Use of Open Government and Innovative Technologies



For federal agencies to be successful in their continued pursuit of government-wide initiatives such as reforming federal IT, using new technologies to improve government operations and citizen engagement, and enhancing customer experience across government, they require support and assistance. “Today, we have a dual mission to deliver innovative services and solutions to the public and to our government

agency customers,” explains Kathy Conrad, Principal Deputy Associate Administrator of GSA’s Office of Citizen Services and Innovative Technologies (OCSIT). Her office has positioned itself as the government-wide leader in identifying and fostering the adoption of innovative new technologies. OCSIT provides agencies with practical tools, models, and proven practices that can improve the efficiency and effectiveness of government operations while enhancing citizen engagement.

“We are a very lean, but incredibly productive office [consisting of] about 100 super-talented, hard-working people plus a team of excellent contractors with a budget of about \$35 million. We’re a little sparkplug igniting innovation all across government through two primary organizations; the Office of Citizen Services and the Office of Innovative Technologies,” describes Conrad. The Office of Citizen Services provides consumer information and services to the public wherever, whenever, and using whatever device or communication channel they choose. The Office of Innovative Technologies identifies and fosters innovative technologies that help agencies increase efficiency, enhance effectiveness of citizen services, and achieve cost savings.

As part of OCSIT’s senior leadership team, Conrad plays an integral role in its success as the primary advisor to Dave McClure, OCSIT Associate Administrator, on citizen services/engagement, innovative technology programs, and strategic direction. She oversees program management, including policy development, oversight, and implementation of operations and stakeholder outreach. She also moves forward the office’s high-priority areas: open government, mobile technology, and cloud computing.

“To deliver our mission,” outlines Conrad, “we have three key strategic goals. Our innovation goal focuses on expanding and enhancing public engagement with government using innovative, cost-effective solutions and practices that can be adapted and adopted government-wide. Second, customer intimacy focuses on delivering best-in-class customer experience that is driven by results other agencies can use. Finally, we have our operational excellence goal ... developing, implementing, and accelerating adoption of new technology platforms and initiatives that can improve operational efficiency and effectiveness. We seek to foster federal leadership in implementing solutions that are faster, cheaper, and more sustainable.”

Conrad’s office plays a lead role in pursuing a cloud-first policy to save money. “It’s forcing agencies to consider whether there are better, more agile ways to use scarce IT resources to enable achievement of desired program and mission outcomes,” declares Conrad. Cloud is a utility where you buy the services you need to meet real-time demands. “Cloud solutions,” according to Conrad, “offer infrastructure-as-a-service solutions like service and storage that can be used to host websites, software-as-a-service for applications such as e-mail, or platform-as-a-service which can be used for testing and development.” She points out the cloud’s benefits.



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“We’ve found that social media is reaching our customers at a rate that is orders of magnitude higher than traditional communications channels. As of August 2012, we interacted with citizens two million times this year using new media which is a 305% increase from last year.”

“First, it’s cheaper. Services are automatically delivered and consumed as they are [provided].” Agencies can shift from owning and maintaining costly physical assets to managing service delivery. “Second, it’s actually better in terms of performance. On-demand services enable flexible, rapid response to dynamic business needs ... as your needs change, you can get the services that you actually need and it’s faster.” Agencies can dramatically decrease the time needed to deploy or implement solutions. “It’s better, faster, and cheaper, but it’s always important to remember cloud computing is not about the technology. It’s about mission enablement.”

To accelerate the adoption of secure cloud solutions, OCSIT launched the Federal Risk Authorization Management Program (FedRAMP). Currently, most agencies conduct their own security assessment and authorization for every acquired system. FedRAMP substantially reduces costs by providing a single, provisional authorization that all agencies can use as the basis for an Authority to Operate (ATO). “To date we’ve accredited 15 third-party assessment organizations and received over 50 applications for FedRAMP assessment and authorizations from agencies,” she notes.

OCSIT also accelerates and incubates government-wide social media and public engagement solutions that focus on transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement, highlighted by such initiatives as Data.gov and Challenge.gov. Data.gov provides clear, accessible, and easy-to-use online government data. “The future of Data.gov,” offers Conrad, “is to focus on enabling data discovery, use, and impact. By using application programming interfaces (APIs) and open data standards, citizens, developers and others can easily access and harness the value of data to develop new products and services that improve the quality of people’s lives.” She offers examples like The San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District’s lifesaving mobile app that allows CPR-trained volunteers to be notified if somebody nearby needs emergency assistance. The American Red Cross developed a hurricane app allowing citizens to monitor storm conditions, prepare for emergencies, find help, and let people know that they’re safe. “If Data.gov makes data discoverable and accessible, Challenge.gov offers a new tool and platform to engage the public in harnessing

the value of the data.” Challenge.gov is a crowdsourcing platform to find solutions to government problems through challenges and prizes. Many of the challenges use open data sets. It’s important to note that agencies are actually authorized to conduct these competitions and contests under the American Competes Act, and according to Conrad, they are doing it. “When we launched Challenge.gov back in 2010, we had 35 challenges from 15 different agencies. As of this September 2012, we have challenges from 47 agencies and average seven new challenges per month. You pay only for successful entries or solutions. It has proven to be just an amazing tool for achieving big breakthroughs where solvers invent products, write software, design systems, develop mobile apps, [and] create videos and games.” Examples like the Hungry Hiker and Explode Your Food apps promote healthy kids. There’s the My Money App Up Challenge to produce a mobile app that can offer consumers better, faster, more convenient access to financial products, services, tools, and information to make positive financial choices.

Conrad acknowledges that innovative ideas and programs cannot come to life in a vacuum. “Partnership and teamwork are at the core of all of our operations. We depend on broad input from the stakeholders we support through established channels. Social media and open government provide tools to get direct feedback from our customers,” says Conrad. “If you combine a fabulous mission,” she admits, “with lots of customer demand, it helps keep people motivated even when times are a bit tough.” ■

To learn more about GSA’s Office of Citizen Services and Innovative Technologies go to www.gsa.gov/portal/content/105227.



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



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