

Dr. David McClure

Associate Administrator, Office of Citizen Services and Innovative Technologies
U.S. General Services Administration

By Michael J. Keegan

Promoting Transparency, Participation, and Innovation in Government




On his first day in office, President Obama signed the Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government, declaring: “My administration is committed to creating an unprecedented level of openness in government. We will work together to ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration.” With these words, the Obama administration challenged federal agencies to become more

transparent, participatory, and collaborative. These three principles taken together form the foundation of the president’s Open Government Directive, issued in December 2009, requiring federal agencies to take immediate and specific steps to achieve its ends. “It has some core things that agencies are expected to do in order to meet its requirements and realize its vision,” says Dr. David McClure, associate administrator of the Office of Citizen Services and Innovative Technologies (OCSIT) at the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA). The success of such an initiative rests on a fundamental change in the culture and operations of federal agencies.

To that end, Dr. McClure and the office he leads play an integral role in making the aspiration of open government real, providing government-wide solutions and assistance to federal agencies needing to fulfill both the letter and spirit of such an ambitious directive. McClure joined GSA in August 2009 as the associate administrator of its Office of Citizen Services and Communications. In mid-2010, his office was reconstituted as the Office of Citizen Services and Innovative Technologies. “We’re the nation’s focal point for data, information, and services offered by the federal government to citizens,” explains McClure. “We also play a leadership

role in identifying and applying new technologies to effective government operations and excellence in customer service.” His office has become a leader in the use of social media and Web 2.0 technologies to facilitate government-wide capabilities in support of the Open Government Directive. It is also charged with increasing the use of prizes and challenges as tools for promoting open government and innovation, and supporting the implementation of the Office of Management and Budget’s (OMB) cloud computing initiative. According to McClure, open government is not new to GSA. For years the agency has played a vital role in implementing government-wide policies and initiatives.

GSA has been working with OMB on a number of transparency initiatives such as Data.gov and the IT Dashboard. “I think Data.gov, for [being] just over a year old, has had an enormous amount of information loaded on to it and available to the public. Other countries have copied Data.gov and some have surpassed us in terms of the amount of information they’re putting out. I think it represents a good example of delivering on the promise of transparency,” admits McClure. He also points out that providing access to enormous volumes of data sets can’t be an end in itself. “Our challenge with Data.gov is turning that tremendous amount of data into something more useful. There’s a lot of raw data you can pull, manipulate, analyze, and use. In fact, there are some tools on that site—such as the mashup tool—that can help you navigate the data and make sense of it. If you want to know how your city ranks in terms of employment, education, pollution, or health care, you can actually take data from Data.gov, and with a simple interface on a web mash tool, create your own dashboard of how your city compares.” More functionality is needed in order to make platforms such as Data.gov more useful. “Having run USA.gov, we know citizens want data that relates to where they live. The next version of Data.gov



“It’s about getting data into the public domain—a push to have information that historically has been inaccessible to the public visible for the average citizen to use to gain insight into government operations, activities, and results.”



“The last principle of open government is innovation. It’s about not standing still, but thinking of new ways to direct activities and processes so that the government can be as innovative as possible and open to new ideas and new ways of conducting the business of government.”

will be much more geospatially enabled. It’s the use of the information that we want to see enriched,” declares McClure.

Open government is also about increasing dialogue with the public, using various channels of participation to engage citizens in a two-way manner. “We’re creating opportunities for the public and federal agencies to interact using social media and other collaboration tools,” says McClure. GSA ran an online discussion for federal employees and the public to converse, share ideas, vote on ideas, and react to what others had to say. “We hosted a five week online dialogue. We had over 2,000 ideas, 20,000 votes across the entire government, and new ideas for how agencies could be more transparent and potentially improve service delivery,” notes McClure. They did this rather inexpensively, using a collaboration platform that could be leveraged across the entire federal government at virtually no cost to agencies. “We conducted the market research. We stood up the technology, did the policy lift, security review, and privacy assurances, and allowed agencies to use the tool basically for free. This is unprecedented,” describes McClure.

“The last principle of open government is innovation,” declares McClure. “It’s about not standing still, but thinking of new ways to direct activities and processes so that the government can be as innovative as possible and open to new ideas and new ways of conducting the business of government.” We see this with GSA’s launch of Challenge.gov—a platform for federal agencies to conduct challenges and contests to innovate and find solutions. “It’s a fundamental recognition that the best ideas never reside in a single unit, office, or person. We’re setting up challenges and contests for citizens and organized groups to develop new ways to deliver services, organize and use information, or develop a new product.” McClure cites NASA’s success in leveraging this innovative approach to finding and advancing its mission. With Challenge.gov, all federal agencies will have a readily accessible online platform they can use to post a challenge in need of a solution. “It’s a fascinating and quite different [approach] than everything going through a competitive procurement. It’s groundbreaking,” asserts McClure.

McClure’s office is involved in other similarly innovative, government-wide initiatives, such as implementing the federal cloud computing strategy. “Cloud computing provides enormous economies of scale for the federal government,” explains McClure. “It gets us out of running [a] huge IT infrastructure. My role is to operationalize the cloud strategy—how to move the adoption and use of cloud computing.” As part of this effort, GSA runs Apps.gov, an online source for cloud computing applications for federal agencies. Though there are plans to expand the offerings available on this site to include storage and virtualization, McClure acknowledges that security, privacy, and procurement challenges persist.

McClure recognizes that the success of open government initiatives rest on transforming culture and having the right people, with the right skills, leading in the right direction. The Web Manager University has contributed to many of these initiatives developing the necessary skills and talents of federal employees. “It’s a hidden gem,” declares McClure. “It started off with less than 100 people 10 years ago. Now it has between 2,500 and 3,000 web managers from across the federal government. It’s a good example of an informal structure being created to capitalize on collective wisdom, problem-solving, and just getting things done.” The open government working group is another vehicle for sharing best practices and lessons learned, and for creating an open dialogue on these matters. In the end, “It’s not about the technology,” McClure acknowledges. Open government is about finding ways to better engage citizens on issues important to them. ■

To learn more about the GSA’s Office of Citizen Services and Innovative Technologies, go to www.gsa.gov/portal/category/25729



To hear *The Business of Government Hour’s* interview with Dr. David McClure, 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.



To read the full transcript of *The Business of Government Hour’s* interview with Dr. David McClure, visit the Center’s website at www.businessofgovernment.org.