

Innovation That Matters

By Dan Chenok

Using new technologies more effectively is among the key priorities for organizations today. The federal government, led by the Obama administration, state and local governments, nonprofits, and leading private sector companies all seek ways to harness the advantages of innovation. The challenges faced by government in this environment are not new—business and technology managers have long sought to optimize how information technology (IT) supports their mission at reduced overall cost. Today, however, radical advances in computing power offer an unprecedented opportunity to reshape information and service delivery for citizens, while also streamlining program operations.

Entrepreneurial managers who work in and with government will find ways to initiate and leverage innovation in order to achieve important results: to serve more people at a similar or lower cost, while enhancing the quality of services delivered and the support of constituents for services they receive. A new breed of manager is emerging: one who embraces technological change, in areas that include cloud computing, social media, and cybersecurity, so as to improve the provision of ideas, services, and products. This breed of 21st century public sector manager leverages multiple web-based channels—not for their own sake—but to link innovation with improved mission performance. Put another way, they use innovation to make government work better.

How does this very modern manager—the “manager as innovator”—succeed? As importantly, how can these insights be shared to enhance how the public sector operates? To answer this question, I have outlined the following characteristics that drive success:

Know the Enterprise Mission

Innovators understand that their work is about delivering meaningful results. For example, the person who comes up with an interesting use of cloud computing for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) will achieve high value when that technology allows EPA to fulfill its mission



more effectively. This can take many forms: using a cloud application can enable EPA to expand its resources to more locations without buying more computers; similarly, the cost savings derived from managing infrastructure with a cloud-based approach can be redirected from hardware to mission. In either case, the innovators must understand that what they do has direct impact on their organization in achieving its strategic objectives.

Taking an enterprise perspective is also key to success. It does not simply mean viewing the agency as the enterprise; rather, the citizen’s perspective defines the enterprise. Continuing with our environmental theme, innovation can be used to make a clean energy solution more impactful. This can occur through linking data across programs from the Department of Energy, NOAA, and EPA with state-level enforcement agencies, such that regulated companies can see economic results of energy efficiency measures and citizens can determine which measures have the greatest impact for protecting their local areas. New ways to collect, share, and present data can thus accomplish multiple mission goals.



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The manager as innovator can adopt good process steps to help identify meaningful organizational imperatives, including analysis or agency or industry information, stakeholder interviews, and formal and informal brainstorms—all are useful tools for determining what really matters to an organization, and where technology can be of greatest value.

Look Down the Technology Road

Having been steeped in key enterprise priorities, the innovator can then take a long view of current and future technologies. New developments in biometrics, for example, can increase productivity significantly—this is the futuristic piece of innovation. Managers should be looking at technologies that are:

- Forward Looking (up to 10 years out)
- High impact and game-changing
- Disruptive to business/threshold crossings
- High potential to spur new business processes

In this phase, innovation reflects the challenge of harnessing new, disruptive technologies—incremental change does not have the same impact. But again, the new is only as good as how it helps organizations improve, and the manager as innovator needs to link potential breakthroughs to expected future benefits. The advent of Federal Chief Technology Officers, both in the White House and throughout agencies, holds promise that this linkage will continue to strengthen over time.

Link Stakeholders to Benefits

Many government managers and their constituencies want to make a difference, but struggle with how to move beyond current modes of operation. Public innovators can demonstrate to organizational leaders that improvements in information exchange can bring mission improvement. They



also seek out and reward successful ideas from the private sector, and show beneficiaries that they will receive better services because technology enhances operational excellence. For example, the innovator uses social media not just to share information among friends, but to get the message out about the benefits of a program, create communities of program stakeholders, and identify opportunities for streamlining within the program and across similar programs that serve the same constituents.

Perhaps even more game-changing is the capacity that innovation has to unleash the power of large groups of citizens to help improve government. The Obama administration's Open Government Initiative actively promotes this, employing collaborative tools and technologies to bring new voices and ideas in shaping program design. The General Services Administration, through its Office of Citizen Services and Innovative Technologies, is taking a lead role in this effort, and other federal agencies are following suit. These organizations increasingly leverage well-regarded private sector communities like Innocentive, which brings together experts across the globe to solve hard problems.



A companion to the Open Government Initiative is the increasing use of non-traditional public outreach, including prizes and challenges, to help solve problems in a fast, lightweight process that has traditionally been reserved for lengthy procurements. Innovative managers embrace these non-traditional venues, such as Challenge.Gov, understanding that a small investment can yield a comparatively large return.

Confront Risks Directly

For as long as people have sought to change the status quo, they have had to address interests who benefit from how things are currently structured. Those invested in the status quo can be unwilling to take on risk, whether real or perceived. The public innovator sees these challenges as opportunities to convert the naysayers; in this sense, there is a strong change management component to the innovation agenda. Obstacles to bringing change that makes government work better, and ways to overcome those obstacles, include:

- Obstacle: Funding models such as the two-year Federal budget process may constrain introduction of new ideas.
Strategy: Working across multiple stakeholders to get funding from current operations, rather than long-term budget planning, can help get change off the ground, as occurred with many e-government initiatives in prior administrations.
- Obstacle: The agency direction or strategy is misaligned.
Strategy: Funding commitments can keep technology connected with business strategy.
- Obstacle: Incrementalism may limit opportunity for real change.
Strategy: Engage non-traditional sources, including the academic community.
- Obstacle: Stovepiped communications constrain the exchange of new ideas.
Strategy: Focus specifically on methods and processes for sharing across divisions.

Reward the Pursuit of the New

Giving recognition to the impact of positive change will help innovative leaders focus attention on meaningful results. Activities that value and measure the success of technological change can drive behavior toward adopting innovations that make a difference. This includes open recognition of innovators for their achievements, such as patent achievement awards for successful patent filings and publications. Finally, reward systems should not categorize “unsuccessful projects” as failures—instead, they are learning experiences that can be leveraged in future work.

Conclusion

New technologies bring real and sustained improvement to the public sector. Leading public sector managers apply those innovations to achieve mission and program goals, and as a result have an unprecedented opportunity to make a difference. In the 21st century, promoting the manager as innovator can mean the difference between the marginal improvement in the comparatively slow process of government, and the leap ahead in the potential for large-scale productivity gains in the public sector. ■