

Finding Opportunities for Modernization



While modernizing legacy applications is an important goal for digital transformation, many state and local government IT leaders have had more pressing issues on their hands. The pandemic forced many organizations to defer modernization or seek stop-gap solutions. **Tony Powell**, chief strategist and innovation officer at Dell Technologies, discusses the challenges and opportunities in front of IT leaders today.

How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact state and local government IT modernization plans?

The pandemic pushed most organizations into firefighting mode. They don't have the luxury of doing wholesale rewrites of legacy software, which often take years. At the same time, organizations need to make these systems more efficient in order to serve constituents and improve operations — especially during the pandemic. Instead of replacing systems, organizations are augmenting them by putting new technologies on the front end. These efforts solve some of the immediate problems; however, many legacy challenges remain because organizations just haven't had time or resources to do the rewrites.

Other than lengthy and laborious rewrites, what's standing in the way of modernization efforts?

Budget is the core issue — having the necessary resources in terms of dollars and staff. Legislators are currently dealing with budget shortfalls at the state, county and city levels. The question is whether dollars will be put aside for modernization, given the shortfalls. Organizations are waiting to see what legislators will do.

What approaches or tools can help organizations address these obstacles?

Given the budget challenges, I'd recommend focusing on core

inefficiencies of the applications and addressing those first. Organizations can often beef up the support around these applications more quickly than rewriting them. We're also seeing organizations take advantage of federal stimulus funding to expand technologies like 5G and rural broadband that tie into legacy modernization. This is quite exciting in terms of addressing the digital divide and smart city opportunities.

How can organizations stay up to date while minimizing the disruption of constant change?

That's the life of the CIO. You set forth a five-year plan and invariably some sort of disruption arises; so, you've got to plan for the unplanned. That's usually done by having a well-laid five-year strategic plan that addresses the strengths and weaknesses of your organization and where you're likely to run into those weaknesses in the future. Having said that, no one could have predicted the once-in-102-years event of the pandemic. It has thrown serious wrinkles into organizations' strategic goals because they've been diverted to address more pressing needs. What you usually do in that case is put the things that you can't do on the side burner and document them so you can pick them

back up when things settle down. Organizations that are in the heat of the pandemic response have done a lot of that.

How can organizations accelerate modernization in the current environment?

I suggest looking at modern technologies like Kubernetes to change the way your software runs locally and in the cloud, so it's more versatile and you establish an exit strategy for the cloud. Whether that is an on-prem cloud or a public cloud, you want to be able to move things when and where you need and not have lock-in.

What advice do you have for state and local government leaders who are facing legacy modernization?

There's no easy answer when it comes to legacy modernization. I've done many large-scale legacy system replacements. In some cases, the rewrites can take more than 10 years from conception to completion. I would suggest that leaders remain vigilant and carefully choose which opportunities to pursue. You never want a good opportunity to go to waste — especially in government. Even though the pandemic has been difficult from a personal and collective perspective, as a CIO, you're always looking to move the needle in terms of improving citizen services. The pandemic will continue to present opportunities that CIOs have to be ready to take advantage of in terms of meeting that goal.

A woman with dark hair is wearing a white VR headset and looking down at a 3D architectural model of a skyscraper on a wooden table. The background is a blurred office or workshop setting.

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