

Executive Viewpoint

ONE-ON-ONE WITH KRIS ROWLEY

GSA's chief data officer shares his views on making data a part of the conversation.



KRIS ROWLEY
CHIEF DATA OFFICER
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The General Services Administration is one of the most data-heavy agencies in the federal government. It generates millions of pieces of information that is useful for internal and external stakeholders. Kris Rowley is GSA's Chief Data Officer. He sat down with Francis Rose, host of Government Matters on ABC 7 and News Channel 8, for an exclusive interview on how GSA uses its data, makes sure its data is clean, and what the future holds for data management and use at the agency.

Rose: What are the most popular kinds of data your internal stakeholders want to use?

Rowley: One is operational program data, the work our Federal Acquisition Service and Public Building Service provide to our federal partners. The second is on the management side. The data crosses over a lot, specifically from the management side to the business side, so they can better assess how much it costs them to do business.

Rose: How are you merging the legacy data that you've had around for a long time with what you're able to collect now digitally?

Rowley: I think technology over the last few years has made it easier to do that. What technology hasn't done is make it easier to ensure that we have high quality data that we're blending together. The people who were managing data ten or 15 years ago didn't envision the types of analysis or visualization tools that we have today. In a lot of cases, the data quality suffered, because it wasn't going to be used in that manner.

Rose: What are the best practices that you've established about data hygiene?

Rowley: The position I've been pushing

people towards has been taking the data as it exists from the system, consuming that in an environment where you can blend datasets together to your heart's content, and then layering on an analytics tool or visualization tool to present the data. But I don't want them manually cleaning up data for particular presentations. It's so easy for people to say, "I'm going to change a number for my presentation." I keep telling them changes have to be made in the source system, otherwise you'll never stop cleaning up data manually.

Rose: Are we far enough along in this data revolution where that's an acceptable answer to people who aren't data professionals?

Rowley: I think it's a work in progress. Sometimes they're focused on the data that's not accurate or shows something funny, and they say, "I just can't trust this data. You've got to clean this up before I look at it." My response is, "I can clean this up in five minutes, but that's not going to change what's in your system of record, and that doesn't necessarily change the intent of this conversation."

We're making some headway at GSA. Probably the biggest tool in our toolbox is an executive governing body over data management. I chair that, and it includes deputy level commissioners, the CFO, the CIO, and the Chief of Staff.

Data's not the beginning or the end, though. It's just part of the conversation, and I'm just trying to insert it within the conversation as much as possible.

This interview continues at
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