

Q&A

Executive Viewpoint

A conversation with **Vid Desai**



CIO, Office of Digital Transformation,
U.S. Food and Drug Administration

Why is digital transformation an imperative for the FDA? And how does your public health mission inform your efforts?

The FDA plays a critical role in the health and safety of the American people, and our work also affects much of what every family buys. Products regulated by our agency account for over 20 cents of every dollar that Americans spend. We're also responsible for protecting and promoting public health. We do all this by processing vast amounts of data to support the safety and effective use of the products we regulate.

The amount of data we need to process is growing exponentially. Obviously, our budgets and people cannot be scaled exponentially, and therefore, we need to find ways to efficiently use technology to analyze all this data and make the best decisions we can to keep Americans safe.

Technology is a force multiplier, and this is why we've laid a solid foundation through our Technology Modernization Action Plan and our Data Modernization Action Plan. Modernizing the way the FDA handles technology, IT management and data brings efficiencies that improve our processes and allow the FDA to scale to accommodate exponentially growing

business needs, the innovations happening in science and the changes across all the industries that we regulate. That's why the digital transformation journey we're embarking on is so important to the FDA.

Why did the FDA create the Office of Digital Transformation last year, and what are the office's priorities?

The reorganization essentially aligns the FDA with best practices in data, IT and cybersecurity management across the industry. We've done this to better coordinate the use of information and decisions between the agency centers and offices. We also want to reduce duplication and waste. That's why we're implementing consistent, mature processes that work across all our organizational silos.

Our leadership recognizes the importance of IT as a force multiplier. Because the office reports directly to the FDA commissioner, we have a seat at the table where we can work with the senior executive leaders to align what we do from an IT perspective to support their business needs. We want to focus our efforts on the most critical needs and deliver solutions as efficiently and as quickly as we can.



By implementing consistent processes, we are now better coordinating our activities and working as **one IT across the FDA.**"



When you have a transparent discussion about the costs versus benefits, people start to understand **the value proposition that IT brings.”**

What is your strategy for achieving those goals, and what progress have you already made?

Our strategy is to invest in our staff and build the best IT organization we can. That’s a huge part of our focus right now. Another reason we established the office at the agency level is to help with governance and collaboration across all the centers. By implementing consistent processes, we are now better coordinating our activities and working as one IT across the FDA.

The implementation of a standard framework for strategic planning will help us align what we do from an IT perspective with the FDA’s business needs. Our program, which we’re calling the Blueprint for Good IT, has significant support from FDA leadership. That’s the program through which we’re driving this consistent process implementation and the strategic planning work to ensure that we’re governing in a collaborative manner. We’re sensitive to specific, unique needs that our centers have, but we’re also doing things in a standardized way where we can.

These are significant changes from how we were previously organized and how we used to implement IT. The execution of all those improvements requires some fairly significant additional funds because our processes are changing, our mode of operation is changing and many of the technologies we’re implementing today are changing. We’re very fortunate to have executive leaders who understand and are willing to prioritize those needs. We’re also having some very good discussions with our congressional colleagues who understand the need for change and are helping us fund some of that activity.

How does the FDA partner with industry to achieve its transformation goals?

We value our partnerships with the technology industry to help us solve some of these challenges. We plan to work internally to define areas where we need specific help in,

say, data management. We want to share information about areas of innovation where we would like to see industry engagement and then invite companies to present some potential solutions.

To facilitate that, this year we’re working toward establishing an Industry Engagement Day where we have that kind of targeted engagement with industry. We would shape the kind of solutions we need and then companies can tailor their solutions to those needs.

What advice do you have for other agencies as they pursue their own transformation initiatives?

There are two ways of driving change. You can go bottom up, or you can go top down. I believe you’ve got to go top down. You have to start with executive buy-in, and executive buy-in typically doesn’t happen without earning trust. You earn trust by making and delivering on commitments.

I would also advise my IT colleagues to align their activities with the business. It’s not about implementing this technology or that technology. It’s about improving this business process or meeting that business need.

We also need to be transparent. There are some things that we do well in IT, and we should celebrate them. But we also need to acknowledge that there are areas where we haven’t done well, and we need to fix them. In addition, metrics are important. A lot of people believe IT is expensive or wasteful, but when you have a transparent discussion about the costs versus benefits, people start to understand the value proposition that IT brings.

One of the biggest things I would say is that IT leaders should focus on solutions rather than the challenges that can mount. Where there is a will, there is a way. Much of the change we need to drive is difficult, but when we put it in positive terms, people can understand and align with that change. ■

Count on Carahsoft®

The Trusted Government IT Solutions Provider

Carahsoft and our ecosystem of technology manufacturers, reseller partners, and integrators are proud to offer thousands of solutions to support the Federal government's IT requirements and initiatives.



Providing the best value in the market through our best-of-breed and emerging technologies, Carahsoft is here to support all of our government and system integrator partners.

Call [571-662-3350](tel:571-662-3350) to talk to our dedicated Federal System Integrator team, or email BigPrimesTeam@carahsoft.com to learn more.