



Executive Viewpoint

Q&A A conversation with

MARIA ROAT



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The deputy federal CIO talks about how OMB develops guidance and works with the CIO Council to support modernization efforts

How did your previous work prepare you for overseeing governmentwide modernization efforts?

I think having the agency perspective brings a lot of value. I was the CIO at the Small Business Administration and also the CTO at the Department of Transportation. I led the stand-up of FedRAMP, a significant governmentwide program. All of my experience led me to this. Working in the private sector as a government contractor for several years also gave me another viewpoint.

As the recipient of policy and running major programs, I know what it takes to execute. When OMB develops memorandums and policies, my perspective allows me to ask better, more informed questions, such as: Did you think about the impact? Are there resources coming with it? How do you expect the CIOs to execute on this?

It helps to have gone through a huge digital transformation, especially at the SBA, and to understand the challenges and what it takes to move an agency forward quickly. The effort to consolidate contracts, modernize and standardize technology, move to the cloud, develop the IT workforce and build relationships with the program offices are just a few of many activities necessary to drive change and improve how the government meets its mission and serves the American public.

And we can't just focus on technology because it's critical to consider the workforce. OMB can issue guidance to enable the use of new technologies that drive modernization, but it is also necessary to continuously train the workforce on

new and emerging technologies. Just as important when we consider any technology investment, the workforce using those solutions must also be skilled in the use of technology.

What role does OMB play in helping agencies achieve their modernization goals?

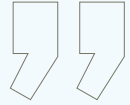
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The Cloud Smart policy, shared-services strategy, Federal Data Strategy, President's Management Agenda and cross-agency priority goals are all heavy on technology because technology is the enabler of the government's mission. Many of those policies are vetted through the CIO Council, and the CIOs provide feedback: "This will work." Or: "This won't work." There is a strong relationship within the CIO Council to provide feedback on those policies as they are being developed to make sure that they're useful and that they actually help the CIOs.

Over the last two years, the Federal CIO team at OMB updated policies and guidance to eliminate barriers to modernization and align the guidance with broader strategic goals. They eliminated many of the old requirements, including reporting requirements that weren't necessary or did not add value. CIOs are strategic partners with agency leaders and are being asked to deliver high-quality solutions to complex problems at a faster rate. Updated and relevant guidance is an enabler.



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What are some of the top challenges agencies face in achieving those goals?

It is a big challenge to try to drive long-term modernization and not have the funding to sustain multi-year initiatives. Agency CIOs are often forced to do as much as they can one year, a little bit the next year and then maybe less than they want the following year because the CIO doesn't have predictable, consistent levels of funding for modernization. A two- or three-year modernization plan turns into four or five years, or sometimes never gets started.

The Modernizing Government Technology Act provides for two programs that help with long-term, multi-year modernization: the Technology Modernization Fund (TMF) and IT working capital funds (IT WCF). The TMF has received more than \$550 million in proposals and funded \$116 million and 10 modernization projects so far. It helps agencies through the transition until they turn off the old system and bring the new online.

Agency IT WCFs give the CIOs the authority and ability to manage the funding over a multi-year period, resulting in the ability to sustain long-term initiatives without reliance on unpredictable funding levels.

There are recognition and expectation from Congress on the need to modernize, but we have to continue the open dialogue about funding and the vehicles that support sustained transformation.

How is the pandemic helping or hindering efforts to modernize IT?

During the pandemic, I saw innovation accelerate as COVID-19 put a spotlight on digital transformation and the need

to adapt quickly. There was a sense of urgency. CIOs had foundational capabilities already in place and were able to very quickly turn around and deploy new solutions.

There was no precedent for the government moving out of the office and working from home at scale. It involved managing the workforce while you're simultaneously building new capabilities in response to new legislation. The CIOs turned around solutions such as new public-facing portals in a week. They had a cloud infrastructure and microservices already in place and were able to scale. In virtual meetings, we saw cross-government collaboration that was remarkable, but it also highlighted the need for us to do it better.

Data sharing across agencies was accelerated for funds distribution, and partnerships with the private sector enabled agencies to spin up and respond very quickly. Agencies shared people, too. It was urgent. It was business *not* as usual.

The CIOs were able to execute quickly because there was a lot of support for rapid acquisitions. Thanks to a partnership between the CIOs, senior procurement executives, the CFOs and the General Services Administration, CIOs were able to move very fast.

I want to give a shout-out to the CIO Council for accelerating its work in using modern technology for mission continuity. During the pandemic, we had daily standup meetings, and we highlighted some long-term strategic challenges we should take on as a council. The CIO Council's ability to work together collaboratively has a considerable positive impact.

What new opportunities are opening up for agencies as they modernize their IT systems?

As agencies undertake a major technology initiative, replacing a legacy system or even conducting a small upgrade, they must ensure that business operations continue. Of course, they also need to continue to focus on cybersecurity.

CIOs are supporting their agencies through data standardization and making better use of data by applying tools like advanced analytics, artificial intelligence and robotic process automation to inform decision-making. And agencies can use data to tell mission stories and show the value of their programs.

The cloud has expanded agencies' ability to support terabytes of data collection without investing in hardware. It all comes back to the opportunities for sustained continuous improvement to build mature capabilities. During the pandemic, agencies were able to implement changes for more interoperability, whether within their agency or across government. As we modernize as a government, more opportunities will arise. We need to sustain that momentum and continue to move fast.

The pandemic showed how fast we could push technology solutions and get through some of the cumbersome bureaucracy. I think there's a big opportunity across the federal government to see what other digital services we can deploy, how we can use data to inform decision-making and how we can continue to drive long-term modernization while being transparent and supporting the American public. ■