

Federal IT's Transformational, Incredible Year

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It goes without saying that 2020 was a year where it has been “business as unusual” for the federal IT community.

But from Maria Roat’s perch as Deputy CIO at OMB, what the technology community accomplished made 2020 an incredible year.

In 2020 CIOs across the federal government had to deliver – no ifs, ands or buts.

“The federal government transformed from on-premise to telework and didn’t miss a beat,” Ms. Roat declared. “Realizing there was a sense of urgency, CIOs met the challenges of increased mission requirements, increased resource sharing and responding to guidance almost daily.”

Across the entire federal government, making telework work, responding to the CARES Act and flipping over to being able to deliver digitally was all happening concurrently. That all this was possible was the direct result of the successful investments made over the past several years in modern infrastructure, zero trust networks and the flexibility and scalability that cloud based solutions provide.

“It really gave the CIOs the ability to configure those commercial platforms and integrate reusable services,” Ms. Roat explained, “and you saw how fast and how efficiently the federal government flipped over not just to telework and serving their employees – the 2.1 million federal workforce – but also the American public across the board.

The cross government collaboration, information sharing and resource sharing was just remarkable and was not just across the federal government, but vertical with the states as well.

“It was not only that successful transition, but being able to support the mission concurrently and to support the American public,” she added.

“The CIO Council really came together and they not only identified what was working now, but where we need to go in the future. So I can’t say enough about the CIOs across the government.”

Pandemic Leadership

Without the cooperation of the workforce, none of this would have been possible.

“2020 has been a year of change and that cooperation with the workforce really gave us a chance to innovate and challenge the norms and status quo that we had,” Ms. Roat said.

The workforce really worked to get the bureaucracy and red tape out of the way and reduce those barriers to meet the mission. Leaning on the workforce to make this

happen was just so critical Ms. Roat noted.

“That’s not just flipping to telework, but all those requirements of the CARES Act and they maintained their momentum through all this change.”

When the CARES Act came through, (and I was still at SBA) we had just days to respond to the requirements and those requirements were sometimes changing daily; and it was that workforce that rolled out portals within days and was able to respond to the PPP loans and grants, she said.

“Working hour after hour – sometimes overnight – we moved everything on the docket so we could take care of these programs. This is a staff that could respond

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to those changes and innovation. Across the federal government being innovative and responsive, while still secure removed red tape and eased bureaucratic road-blocks.”

“I think that it is critically important to acknowledge that flexibility and that ability to innovate, create and respond — even while the entire federal government is flipping over to telework and responding to requirements — was a resounding success.”

Priorities

The mile long list includes continuing the digital transformation and IT modernization. The government has to be digital, nimble, resilient and secure.

“We have to keep moving to AI and other technologies in that digital transformation,” Ms. Roat declared. “And we have to keep on moving with that because it’s not a one-off activity and it requires sustained long term investments as well as the government adopting new techniques and technologies.”

It also requires a culture that embraces risk to some degree, agile adoption and really encourages innovation not just in technology but everything else, like acquisition and digital delivery. This is a necessity for our customers whether internal or external – the American public, she noted.

Because large modernization projects take time, the funding and flexibility to manage well is an area where Congress can help by getting rid of overly restrictive deadlines and one-year funding.

“By not doing that Congress creates unnecessary risk and uncertainty in a lot of the programs and projects across the federal government. We have funding flexibilities like the TMF and the working capi-

tal fund, but we really need to look at that sustained long-term modernization,” Ms. Roat counseled.

“It’s not just that digital transformation, but having that sustained funding and flexibility to really drive that long-term modernization and the transformation we need. Multi-year funding can sustain that modernization. We need to really move in that direction.” ■