



Government CIO Playbook

Meet the Chief Relationship Officer

For today's CIOs, managing relationships and experiences is key to success.



Volume 3



Introduction

Few positions in state and local government are more dynamic than the CIO. Since its public sector inception in the early 1990s, the role has been defined and redefined multiple times in response to changing user expectations, rapid shifts in technology and other factors.

Three decades later, the CIO's job description continues to evolve. Success now rests more on the ability to manage experiences and relationships than running servers and software. Today's IT leaders must be more aligned with and responsive to the needs of internal and external constituents. They need to enable both innovation and efficiency. And they need to find new ways to deliver digital services in an IT environment where change happens faster and staff talent is harder to find and retain.

This Government CIO Playbook, the third in a series, offers strategies and practical examples to help state and local government IT leaders navigate the ever-shifting terrain. This installment stems from a live Government CIO panel at Accela's 2022 Accelerate conference and follow-up interviews with the participants.

Contributors

- Aaron Bentley, CIO, Salt Lake City
- Michelle Taylor, CIO, Leon County, Florida
- Renato Mascardo, Chief Technology Officer, Accela
- Yessica Jones, Director of Customer Success, Microsoft

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— Michelle Taylor, CIO, Leon County, Florida

Strategy 1: Focus on User Experiences and Relationships

- Engage end-users in service design
- Develop a customer service mindset
- Build a track record of trust with stakeholders

A few years ago, Salt Lake City was putting the finishing touches on a new business licensing system when city leaders decided to let an advisory group of local businesses preview it. The group suggested a range of front-end changes that made the system more effective and intuitive for users.

“They said, ‘This is great, but you’re missing some pieces of the puzzle,’” recalls city CIO Aaron Bentley. “So the product evolved.”

Today, seeking broader input on the design of digital services is standard practice for the city, which regularly engages residents, businesses, internal users and other stakeholders to provide feedback.

“It changes the model of us thinking we know what’s best for our customers,”

Bentley says. “Now we don’t just rely on our internal subject matter experts. We look to our community and have them help us design it.”

This approach is becoming more common among state and local government IT leaders. For CIOs and their teams, managing user experiences and relationships is an increasingly important part of the job.

In Salt Lake City, input often comes from established community advisory committees — which give residents a voice in local commerce, public safety and other topics. The city also conducts user surveys more frequently and redesigned them to produce more actionable information. A newly appointed chief equity officer adds perspective on access and inclusion.

“We’re really focused on talking to stakeholders that use our systems and asking how we can make their jobs easier,” Bentley says. “At the end of the day, we’re a service organization for our community.”

A customer service mindset has been critical to Leon County, Florida, CIO Michelle Taylor’s role in a growing set of shared services. Besides providing enterprise technology services across Leon County government, Taylor’s team

supports a shared GIS service with the city of Tallahassee, a consolidated dispatch system used by city and county emergency responders, and a new regional real-time crime center spearheaded by Leon County Sheriff Walter McNeil and housed on the Florida State University campus.

Engaging more tightly with users — and building a track record of meeting user expectations — opens the door to projects and partnerships that emphasize the value of enterprise CIOs and their teams.

“It all circles back to trust,” says Taylor. “Our stakeholders trust we have their best interests at heart — that we’re looking out for them and want to help them be successful.”

Strategy 2: Tap New Talent Pools

- **Explore contract-to-hire arrangements**
- **Look for candidates from immigrant communities and other non-traditional sources**
- **Consider apprenticeships to fill talent gaps, but start slow and be patient**

Leon County’s IT department has weathered the Great Resignation better than many local government technology teams. But the leanly staffed organization still feels the sting when positions go unfilled — and lately there have been a few more than usual.

“We rarely have vacancies, but this year we might have five or six — and when you only have 50 people, that’s 10% of the workforce,” says Taylor. “If someone’s missing from the team, it hurts.”

Hiring and retaining IT and cybersecurity talent is one of the biggest pain points for state and local government CIOs. Leaders must look for new methods and untapped talent pools to fill the gaps.

Taylor says a contract-to-hire approach helps her cast a wider net and move faster when filling staff vacancies. She works with temporary staffing agencies to locate promising candidates and then moves high performers into permanent positions.

The county typically agrees to a six-month contract term with the staffing



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agency, after which the employee can be hired permanently. Taylor says contract staffing arrangements have become more flexible and affordable due to changes within the industry, making them a quick and low-risk way to fill vacancies.

“After the contract period ends, the employee is on another six-month probation with the county, so it really gives us a year to decide if an employee is a good fit for us and if we’re a good fit for them,” Taylor says. “We’ve used that approach multiple times and it really works well.”

Apprenticeships and internships are another tactic. Salt Lake City used CARES Act dollars to expand its internship program, which now includes working with a local nonprofit to reach out to the city’s large immigrant community.

“We found people in our refugee and immigrant communities who were software developers or had other valuable experience,” says Bentley. In fact, one of the city’s first apprentices, a software engineer who immigrated from Moldova, is now a member of Bentley’s cybersecurity team.

The program, which launched with two or three people a few years ago, now has 20 apprentices. “It has increased our diversity and alleviated some of our talent demand,” he says. “We don’t ask for new positions at the same rate.”

Bentley’s advice to other agencies: Start slow, be patient and build a mentorship culture.

“You need to find people within your organization who are willing to take an apprentice under their wing,” he says. “And you need to understand that an apprentice probably won’t be much help at first, but after a few months you’ll have someone who can do a lot of work and grow. It’s been incredible for us.”

Strategy 3: Move Toward Service-Based Approaches

- **Focus on features and functionality — not hardware and software**
- **Set the vision and create a plan**
- **Get comfortable with being a change agent**

With demand for digital services increasing, technology systems growing more complex and IT talent hard to find, CIOs must explore alternative methods of getting things done. An expanding array of services makes it easier for IT leaders to offload traditional technology assets and the overhead that comes with them.

“Govtech is perfect for SaaS [software-as-a-service] consumption,” says Renato Mascardo, chief technology officer for Accela. “Agencies will struggle to find SQL server experts and other bespoke talent, and they really shouldn’t be trying to staff those positions.”

SaaS partnerships let agencies concentrate on the features and functionality they need from an application instead of the equipment required to run it. “If they can build trusted relationships with service providers, I think they’ll be better off,” Mascardo says.

But CIOs shouldn’t underestimate the amount of change involved in making this transition. The shift toward services affects everything from finance and procurement to the makeup of government IT teams.

“It impacts foundational things like how you pay for a software subscription over time instead of a one-time purchase. From a talent perspective, you’ll need analysts instead of data center staff and developers. And you’ll need a new approach to security and compliance,” Mascardo explains. “It’s important to put the right processes in place to address these issues.”

Transitioning complex legacy environments to the cloud won’t happen overnight. It’s important to set the vision now and steer your organization toward the goal.

“Get comfortable being a change agent,” Mascardo tells CIOs.

Understanding your current IT environment is key to making a transition plan. Factors such as software licensing cycles, hardware refresh cycles, relationships with business units and how well current applications meet constituent needs all come into play when deciding which systems to move and when to do it.

Ultimately, embracing services will put public sector IT on a more sustainable path

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— Aaron Bentley, CIO, Salt Lake City

and enable CIOs to focus on what really matters — innovating to help agencies perform better for their constituents.

“There aren’t a lot of frontiers left to digitize, but this is one of them,” Mascardo says. “There’s a phenomenal opportunity for both CIOs and vendors to lead the shift.”

Strategy 4 — Innovate to Empower Business Users

- **Bring shadow IT into the light**
- **Strengthen relationships between central IT and department-level teams**
- **Build bonds between IT and business units at all levels of the org chart**

When a recent audit criticized Salt Lake City’s IT department for allowing shadow IT, Bentley pushed back. “I said that sounds like a mindset from 20 years ago, which they didn’t appreciate very much,” he says. “But it led to a good conversation.”

These days, the need to respond faster to user needs is blurring the

line between IT and business units. In Salt Lake City, that resulted in a hub-and-spoke model where the central IT department sets governance policies and delivers core services like network connectivity and authentication platforms, while department-level business systems analysts lead application deployment.

“I tell people I embrace shadow IT, because if you embrace it, it’s no longer in the shadows, it’s just technology,” Bentley says. “Analysts in the departments don’t report directly to me. It’s a dotted line, and we work hand in hand.”

Leon County uses a similar model. The county’s central IT department runs networks, email and collaboration platforms, and other enterprise resources. Department-level IT teams handle specific business applications.

Both Bentley and Taylor say relationships are important to making these arrangements work. “I want departments to feel like we’re an extension of their staff,” says Taylor. “That’s how we operate, and it works pretty well for us.”

In Salt Lake City, Bentley chairs an IT steering committee made up of department business systems analysts. The group meets regularly to discuss citywide IT issues and projects. In addition, Bentley and his staff routinely meet with their counterparts up and down the city org chart.

“It’s great if I’m talking to the chief of police — but if my software team isn’t talking to those business partners, then we’re still buying the wrong solution or fighting against the solution the department is bringing in,” Bentley says. “It takes connectivity at every level of our organization.”

Departments also attend sprint planning and project backlog meetings with Bentley’s team, which creates empathy between business and IT. “The departments are there because it’s their project,” he says. “And that



helps them have compassion for the work we do, and it helps our employees have compassion for the work the departments do. It just builds the bridges we need to be successful.”

Strategy 5: Use Data to Power Better Government

- Be a strategic adviser to agency business leaders
- Combine data from multiple sources to understand complex issues
- Engage stakeholders to build trust

Innovative state and local governments had begun using data analytics to understand complex problems before the pandemic hit, but the global public health emergency raised awareness around how data and technology can help public officials understand and address urgent issues. Now CIOs are positioned to take the lead on using data to strengthen decision-making and improve performance.

“When agency leaders realized how much they rely on technology, the CIO really became a trusted strategic adviser,” says Yessica Jones, former Arkansas state CIO and now director of customer success for Microsoft. “CIOs can partner with business leaders on using data to drive outcomes.”

As examples, she points to state-level data analytics initiatives underway to

reduce recidivism among prison inmates and streamline highway construction.

After using data to guide street repaving several years ago, Salt Lake City is now leveraging analytics to understand and address homelessness. The city created a data lake to house information from multiple departments, and the city’s chief data officer is focused on engaging stakeholders across the organization.

“Here’s the problem we run into as cities: To tackle any large problem — like helping those suffering from homelessness — it can’t be just the police. It can’t be just social workers. It has to be all of us, and all that data sits in different systems,” Bentley says.

Now data from social services, emergency responders, city cleanup crews and other sources is available in a central repository, enabling Salt Lake City officials to examine interconnected issues that contribute to homelessness and measure the impact of remediation efforts.

“We don’t have it solved, but we’re working on it collaboratively,” Bentley says.

As in other areas, trust and stakeholder engagement is key to encouraging data

sharing that’s fundamental for using analytics.

“We have an IT steering committee, we have a data steering committee, and our chief data officer is out there communicating and working with the departments,” Bentley says. “At the end of the day, it’s less about technology and more about relationships.”

Orchestrating Success

CIO success increasingly hinges on the ability to orchestrate these multifaceted relationships. Involving internal and external users more meaningfully into the design process for new services. Forging stronger ties with agency leaders and program managers to be more responsive to business needs. Helping organizations transition toward SaaS and data-driven technologies. All of this is on the plate of today’s public CIOs.

Responding to these priorities, and optimizing IT teams to deliver in this evolving environment, represents both the steepest challenge and biggest opportunity for government IT leaders now — and even more so in the future.

This Government CIO Playbook is volume three in a series of playbooks designed to help state and local government CIOs navigate evolving issues and meet new challenges. Previous playbooks explored [how CIOs are transforming their organizations to work across the enterprise](#) and [critical post-pandemic technology trends](#).

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