

Subject: GovTech: How to Build Legislative Support for Technology Projects

How to Build Legislative Support for Technology Projects

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When a CIO explains a new IT initiative, often politicians come to the table with two thoughts in mind, said Richard Varn, CIO of San Antonio. First, they expect the subject to be hard to understand. "And second, you're just speaking dollar signs to them, saying, 'I want money.'" ... A former CIO of Iowa, Varn also served in the state's House and Senate from 1982 to 1994. He understands the obstacles that get in the way when government officials who manage technology need to communicate with government officials who vote on policy and allocate funds.

...Despite the challenges, it's crucial for CIOs and their management teams to **engage elected officials in regular, substantial conversations about IT**. Because legislators control policy and purse strings, they are crucial partners in any government IT enterprise. CIOs must win their support for technology initiatives. They also need to **stay in touch with the issues that legislators -- and the citizens they represent -- care about, so they can harness technology to address those concerns**.

Misinformation Flies: ...[Challenges] arise when misinformation starts to fly about IT projects and contracts. "We've got to **stop our legislators from getting their IT knowledge from news articles that are either not completely true, have some misleading facts or are written to raise the ire of the public**," said Ron May, an IT consultant and former Colorado legislator and senator...Frequent [Legislator] turnover gives the CIO a constantly shifting audience that also guarantees a constantly shifting agenda the IT department must accommodate.

"In the political world, you have different initiatives that are offered up by different political parties, and that scene changes almost as rapidly as the technology itself," said Phil Montgomery, a member of the Wisconsin State Assembly and co-chair of its Joint Committee on Information Policy and Technology. **Priorities that rise to the top of the agenda ...force an IT department to revise its own to-do list**, complicating the dialog on IT initiatives.

Term limits and turnover are special concerns for Scott McPherson, CIO of the Florida House of Representatives. He regularly needs to adjust his IT plan to fit the agenda of an incoming speaker of the House. ... "You know you need to execute your plan. But you also have to be mindful of what the goals are going to be of the incoming CEO or the incoming speaker, and make sure that you are matching up your IT plan with those realities."

Skip the Nuts and Bolts: With so many challenges to overcome, one important strategy for fostering communications with elected officials is to keep the focus off the nuts and bolts of IT. Instead, **CIOs/IT Management should concentrate on the benefits the technology delivers**.

"The technique is to **speak in business terms** and not techno-speak, and to **talk about a particular problem**," Jarreau said. Legislators don't want to hear why it's important to use virtual servers, but they do want to learn how to save money and provide better service...

Because it's important to **stress business value, whenever possible**, the CIO should have the person who owns the business process become the spokesman for an IT initiative," Varn said. "A new e-recruitment tool should be led by the HR department. And a new e-procurement tool implementation should be led by the purchasing department."...

The Fairfax County, Va., Board of Supervisors institutionalized a similar principle when it created its Information Technology Policy Advisory Committee. This group of citizens, with private- and public-sector IT backgrounds, advises both the board and the IT department. It provides an additional level of perspective on the board's overall strategy, goals and technology investments, said Wanda Gibson, the county's chief technology officer...

Besides seeking private-sector allies, Montgomery also suggests government CIOs **forge relationships with elected officials who are especially interested in IT**. "You need to identify those folks and communicate with them as often as they are willing to listen," he said. It's also important to form one-on-one relationships with legislative staff members, he added.

In addition, the CIO should learn to **think like an elected official**, said McPherson, who picked up that skill while serving in Florida's House in the early 1980s. Among other things, thinking like an officeholder means anticipating **how [does] a proposed IT project or expenditure might appear to the press and the public**. "They need to look at everything and vet everything they want to do through that

prism, and then go about overcoming any objections that might be seen by their leadership while viewing through that same prism," he said.

Build It and They Will Talk: Another strategy for fostering dialog is to **build the communications channels into the IT governance structure**. "My advice to other CIOs is that they establish some sort of regular communications to interact with their elected officials," said Gibson. In Fairfax County -- a high-tech stronghold whose supervisors tend toward the IT-savvy -- the dialog includes both formal meetings and informal exchanges.

"Board members will either e-mail or pick up the phone anytime they have a question," Gibson said. **IT staff talk with board members one-on-one to learn about their interests on a variety of issues**. "Also, my staff holds a meeting with the staff of the board on a quarterly basis to talk more specifically about the use of technology in board offices."

In Colorado, May is providing consulting services to the state Office of Information Technology (OIT). He and state CIO Michael Locatis have discussed **launching an IT blog to talk about current and proposed IT projects**, he said. "That would give the legislator an opportunity to go into the blog, maybe give us an opinion about [a project] or ask a question." They also have talked about creating an online database with information on the state's IT assets and projects.

Another way to foster better communications would be for interested legislators to **form an IT caucus**, May said. Such a group could invite OIT staff **to make presentations on technology projects**.

In Wisconsin, the Division of Enterprise Technology **uses project management software to keep Montgomery and his committee co-chair, Sen. Pat Kreitlow, updated on IT projects**. "You can delve into them at whatever level you want to go," Montgomery said. Legislators can quickly find out if a project is on track or veering off course, and if they wish, they can drill down for more detailed information.

For CIOs, Montgomery said, the most important thing is to **treat interested legislators as members of their own team**. "You need to bring them in under the tent and show them the challenges that you face," he said. "You have to have that relationship with the legislators who are willing to delve into this and establish that layer of trust."

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An update provided by State of Nevada DoIT Research, please advise if you are interested in any additional details or materials, thanks:

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