

Managing Technology Increasingly Requires Managing Human Relationships

By Scott J. Cameron

The popular culture has long been fond of pitting man (or woman) against machine. Who can forget “HAL” in 2001: A Space Odyssey, having fatal disagreements with his human astronaut fellow travelers? Then, of course, there was the former Governor of California immortalizing a role as a “good” android in the series of Terminator thrillers.

People Management vs. Technology Management

Back here in the real world, information technology and human resources are also often viewed as polar opposites, and often in conflict. Still, average human beings are getting more techno-savvy at the same time that technology is getting more sophisticated, user-friendly, and ubiquitous. How many of us could survive professionally without our smartphones?

Agency chief information officers and chief human capital officers may still often seem like they are speaking different languages. However, a recently published study by the American Council for Technology and Industry Advisory Council (ACT-IAC) strongly suggests that the government technology community will increasingly need to rely on people skills. The American Council for Technology is a non-profit educational organization established in 1979 to improve government through the efficient and innovative application of information technology. In 1989 ACT established the Industry Advisory Council (IAC) to bring industry and government executives together to collaborate on IT issues of interest to the government. While the focus of ACT-IAC is on the federal government, the findings of its report apply equally to state and local governments.

More specifically, the study, which I had the privilege of leading, found that future government IT managers will need to rely ever more frequently on non-technical competencies to achieve their goals. The study group interviewed CIOs of about a dozen federal agencies, and also spoke with the National Association of State CIOs (NASCIO). The input from these leaders was strikingly similar.

The Cloud Lowers Cost and Risk

The findings were that government IT managers need to transition from a role of designing, building, and operating the services they deliver to their agency customers. Instead, they will become brokers of services that are increasingly delivered by others. This trend has been underway to varying degrees for quite some time, but it is accelerating now for two reasons.

First, legislatures are increasingly skeptical about funding costly, homegrown, unproven, customized, IT systems secured through unique procurements that have an uncomfortably high

failure rate. Unfortunately, examples abound that justify this legislative skepticism. Perhaps the most dramatic examples include the recent failure of a number of state government deployments of Obamacare websites. That was surpassed only by the national embarrassment that was the federal Department of Health and Human Services' first attempt at its own Obamacare website.

Second, the advance of cloud computing, where software, infrastructure, and data can be accessed relatively easily over the Internet, means that much more can be accomplished at relatively low risk and expense by leveraging the resources of others. The flip side of the advantages of the cloud is that an agency CIO loses a great deal of control; they become much more dependent for their success on their ability to work with others outside their own organization.

People Skills Rule

As a result, ACT-IAC found that a number of non-IT competencies, knowledge, and skills will be an increasingly important part of an IT manager's skill set. These include the ability to:

- Communicate clearly with both their internal clients as well as their external service providers. Internally, they need to work closely with their internal clients to understand their business needs and develop requirements that meet those needs. Externally, they need to be able to communicate the requirements to the service providers and negotiate acquiring the most appropriate solution at a reasonable price.
- Understand the programs of their customers, so they can better intuit internal client needs, and appreciate the context in which those needs are expressed. Consultative skills are necessary to ensure that the IT operation is acquiring precisely what clients really need to get, no more and no less. The IT manager needs to be able to communicate clearly so that ambiguity or uncertainty around their requirements does not pose unnecessary risk to potential external service providers, who mitigate that risk by increasing prices to the government.
- Clearly define performance and service delivery expectations to partners, whether these are other agencies, other levels of government, or contractors.
- Manage to a budget and interact effectively with the agency Chief Financial Officer, since government funding is always tight.
- Understand the procurement process and vendor motivations – with contractors providing a large percentage of government IT needs, whether it is in terms of staff, software, infrastructure, data, or services, the effective government IT manager needs to understand how to structure and manage the procurement process to get the greatest value at the lowest

acceptable risk and cost. In most government agencies, procurement is arcane and full of regulations, and so the IT manager needs to have an effective working relationship with people in the acquisition function to understand how to navigate effectively through the regulations to acquire services in a cost-effective way that meets business needs.

Leadership Skill is Key

From a human resources management standpoint, the government IT manager needs to be a good manager of people. He or she needs to understand strategic approaches to recruit, develop, and retain talent.

The government IT manager of the future needs to do a better job of identifying, recruiting, retaining, and nurturing talent. An ever growing fraction of the government workforce is eligible for retirement. At the same time, an expanding private sector technology job market makes it tougher to recruit and retain agency staff. These factors put a premium on the ability to supervise people skillfully and well.

The government IT manager needs to get the most productivity possible out of the leaner agency IT workforce. This means creating a work environment that fosters high levels of employee engagement. To accomplish this, agency IT managers will need to emphasize the “people-side” of management development. They will have to focus on the interpersonal, communication, and management skills of supervisors. This means government IT executives need to be increasingly willing to promote the best “people person” on their team into subordinate managerial roles, even if that person does not also have the best technical skills.

Invest in Developing Talent

The ACT-IAC offered a number of recommendations to the government CIO community to develop successful future IT managers.

First, they recommended that CIOs institute career modeling. They should define career paths and tracks for IT positions. It is particularly important that they include technical career tracks for those excellent technical staff who are not interested, and not able, to manage people. It should not be necessary for a techie with no interest in management to be forced to become a supervisor in order to achieve a higher salary or greater prestige in an agency. Part of the career modeling should be explicit encouragement of a diversity of experiences, inside and outside of the agency. This could include rotational assignments within the government but outside the IT function. It could also encourage the employee to experience a stint in the IT vendor community.

Second, there is a strong need to create a leadership development program within the agency IT community. Such a program should encourage the employee to experience a diversity of professional settings. Rather than being technology-focused, it should focus on “soft” skills like communications and team-building. It should be cross-functional, ensuring that participants gain experience with the budget and procurement processes, and even human resources! Future government IT leaders will increasingly get their work accomplished through people who are organizationally or physically remote. So the leadership training should emphasize skills necessary for managing virtual and multi-sector workforces. Finally, a leadership development program for future agency IT leaders should incorporate mentoring programs by current leaders.

Third, agency IT managers need to be mindful that they are competing with the private sector for talent. This means they should be thoughtful and assertive about strategically sourcing candidates for agency IT positions.

One strategy may be to establish relationships with IT-focused colleges in their state or community to subtly begin the recruitment process early in the student’s career. Similarly, they should work closely with the agency human resources function to capitalize on existing or create new internship programs for undergraduate or graduate students. Internships can create a pipeline for potential IT employees.

Sell the Mission

In promoting the prospect of government employment to students, agencies should not hesitate to “sell” the vital and uplifting missions of government. Missions like promoting public health, ensuring public safety, and protecting the environment can inspire students. Indeed, it is the mission of an agency that ultimately attracts talent.

I came to personally appreciate the importance of mission as a recruitment tool. I was trying to recruit a Director of Human Resources at the Department of the Interior. The first time we advertised for the position, we used the standard bureaucratic gobbledygook. Hardly anyone applied, even though it was a highly paid executive position. Those who did apply were not too impressive. Then we changed strategy. We ditched the bureaucratese, or most of it anyway. Instead, we invited people to apply for a job at an agency that made the desert bloom, educated the poorest children in America, protected endangered species, performed cutting edge science, provided vast amounts of energy for American society, and protected the nation’s natural and cultural heritage. We ended up with an abundance of qualified applicants, and ultimately made a great selection.

In summary, the successful agency IT manager needs to be at least as good with interpersonal skills as with technology. They need to have competence and confidence in dealing with a

multi-sector workforce that is largely outside of their direct control. Finally, they need to pay a great deal of attention to developing leaders inside their own organizations who are especially skilled at attracting and retaining talent.

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