

Gopal Khanna, CIO of Minnesota, Pushes IT Standardization and Modernization



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In 2005, Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty launched the Drive to Excellence, an initiative to automate processes and make state government function as an enterprise. That same year, Gopal Khanna was named Minnesota's CIO.

GT: The Drive to Excellence involves comprehensive changes to state government. How do you build buy-in among your public work force?

Khanna: The public sector, [is] driven by the desire to serve the citizens by doing good work. We've built on that motivation by creating teams where people are empowered to take action. We need to compress our time to action: If it took two years to make a decision in the past? We have to move faster in government. The work force is happy to see this change because they want to and know how to do things better if given the chance.

GT: What results have you seen?

Khanna: When I assumed this position, I challenged my colleagues to create desktop and laptop standards [in] 90 days. We set up teams - it was cross-boundary collaboration - and they sat down together and said, "Let's focus on the 80 percent of our requirements that can be standardized. There will always be 'exception processing.'"

We now have standards for laptops, desktops, servers and storage. About \$100 million over five years is the estimated savings.

GT: How important are procurement savings in building support for further organizational changes?

Khanna: Those savings occur at the agency level, enabling more investment in mission-critical services. In general, when we talk about IT reform, I believe we focus too much on savings. You need to make an investment first. What I talk about in Minnesota is how much investment we're willing to make in our infrastructure to move away from the 20th-century government operations and toward the 21st-century computing environment. Savings and ROI will happen if the right programs are put in place to make government more transparent, accountable and results-oriented.

GT: So the savings come from making government work better. But saving money isn't the only reason to do this?

Khanna: Exactly. The goal is to have more effective, transparent government that serves citizens on their terms, not our terms. The citizens are saying, "We want 24/7 government on demand. We want government that is totally transparent." Our governor constantly reminds us that we need to be results-oriented and outcomes-oriented. To do that, we need to make serious investment in our infrastructure of government operations.