Federal Technology Executives' Top Tips for Navigating Network Modernization

COMCAST
BUSINESS
Powering Possibilities™
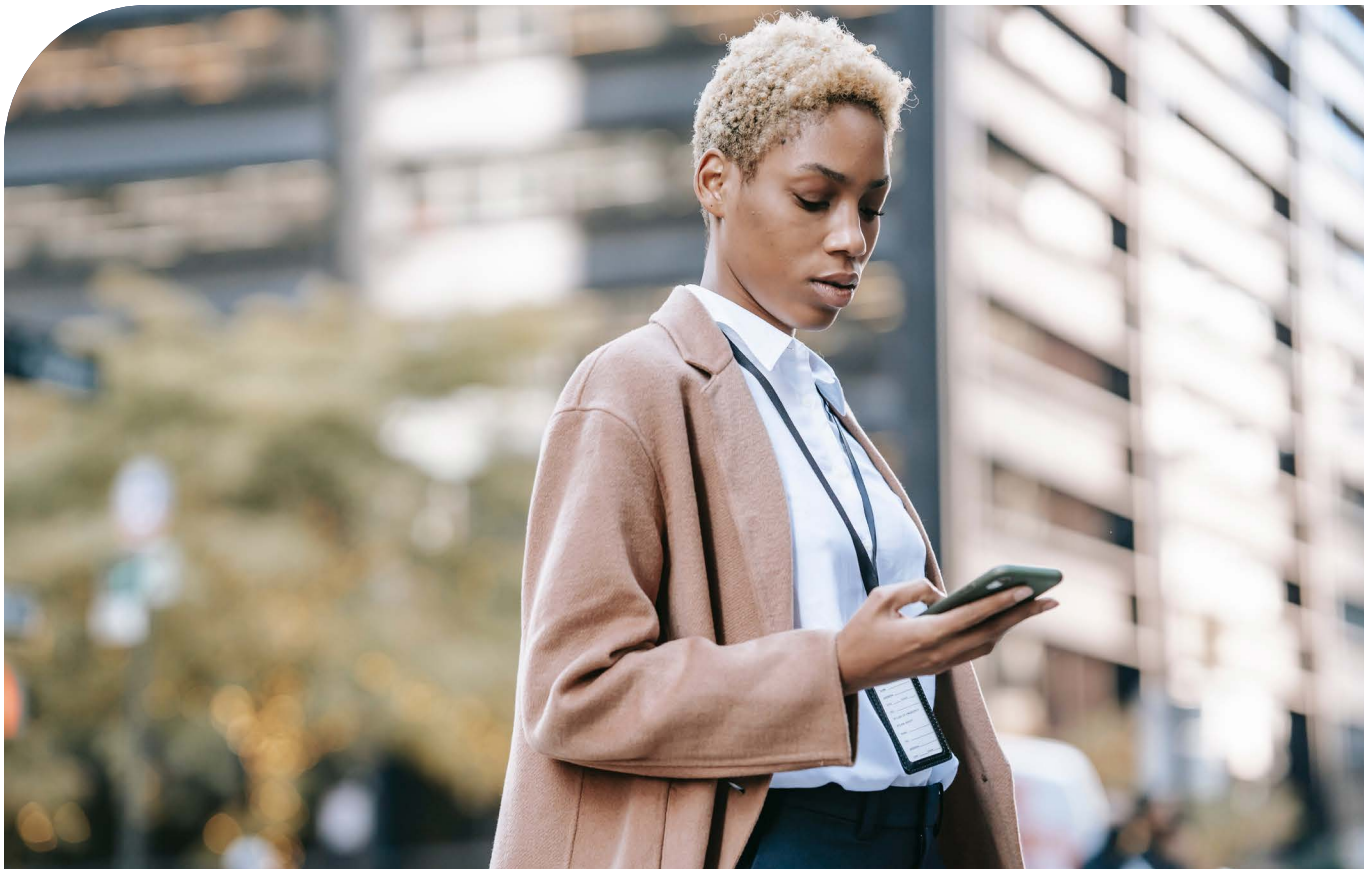
From relationship building to measuring success, technology leaders reveal what they've learned along the modernization journey.

Network modernization, a longtime priority for federal technology leaders, has only become more critical amid expanding hybrid work environments and a government-wide transition to the General Services Administration (GSA) Enterprise Infrastructure Solutions (EIS) contract. To further complicate matters, the modernization journey is never complete.

During an executive roundtable hosted by GovExec and Comcast Government Services, federal and industry leaders spoke about the challenges and opportunities agencies face when pursuing network modernization. Technology leaders from across government shared advice about transforming technology infrastructure, managing cost and time savings, and building trust with stakeholders, as well as their experiences navigating government-wide initiatives.

COMCAST
BUSINESS
Powering Possibilities™

1. Modernization begins with understanding needs and outcomes

Panelists urged technologists to consider the bigger picture when establishing strategic goals and measures of success. Rather than relying on specific technologies or systems to drive modernization, panelists advised taking a step back and shifting focus to ideal outcomes.

It's not just about the technology, said a chief information officer (CIO) at a federal agency. "It's the whole package. When I think about modernization, I think, 'How am I trying to improve, enhance, enable, [or] empower the individuals who are leveraging what we're providing? How am I enabling them and empowering them to deliver on their missions?'"

While there may be temptation among stakeholders to quickly upgrade applications or tools to the next shiny, new technology, having a clear picture of the desired outcome helps IT teams build a constructive plan to get there.

"We're not over here doing IT for IT's sake just because it's cool, right?" said an agency director of IT operations and services. "No, it's because we have come to understand whatever the goal may be, and then we engineer a solution that meets that goal."

"Successful industry partnerships also depend on clear communication of needs," added Colin Gosnell, Director of Federal Government Sales Engineering at Comcast Government Services. "With so many variables in network modernization, navigating the "buzzwords" — SD-WAN, SASE, and zero trust — can become complicated."

"There are all these different elements when it comes to technology that's constantly evolving and changing," Gosnell said. "It's understanding what is the driver behind modernization — regulatory mission, cost cutting, or new applications — that allows us to help you design an architecture that works now and in the future."

To measure success, panelists described the value of more holistic metrics. One agency chief technology officer (CTO) said he analyzes past financial numbers to understand the experiences of the people his agency serves.

"We can calculate the value of the loan portfolio and how many disaster loans we've given out directly but, most importantly, are the external customers able to actually find the services that they need?" he said. "And with the backing of the infrastructure and the network, how many milliseconds does it take for the application to load? How quickly does the application get through the process? Is it 30 days? Well, in a disaster, you need to get through quickly."

2. Relationship building is foundational to success

Technology teams can leverage open dialogue with leadership and stakeholders to develop these strategic goals and metrics. For example, one federal CIO aims to meet quarterly with each agency under his agency's umbrella to get direct feedback about their IT needs.

"It's not about us telling IT what they need during the meetings. It's more of a feedback forum for us to understand what they value, what their priorities are, and what their plans are on the horizon," the agency's director of IT operations and services said. "Then the conversation becomes, 'Let us show you our portfolio and how we might be able to support what you told us you want.'"

Before technology teams can forge ahead with modernization plans, they must cultivate these relationships with the departments they serve. Honest feedback depends on building trust between IT teams and their stakeholders. Once the connection is established, technology leaders will find it easier to get other departments on board.

"It's understanding truly what is the driver behind modernization — regulatory mission, cost cutting or new applications — that allows us to help you design an architecture that works now and in the future."

Colin Gosnell, Director of Sales Engineering, Comcast Government Services

"What's key for me is relationship management. If you can explain or connect what you're doing directly to the mission and business outcomes that these individuals are trying to achieve, then they will want to do it for you because they see the value," an agency CIO said. "It's really about being able to rationalize and explain what you're doing, why you're doing it, and the value it's driving to your business."

3. Pausing to reassess can save time and manage money down the road

It may sound counterintuitive, but pausing can result in greater efficiency. The director of IT operations and services said his agency spent recent years building a more consolidated shared services organizational approach versus a siloed, federated structure. As a result, it's easier for technology teams to build more widely applicable solutions.

"We can raise the flag before we build a one-off solution to validate if there are any others who [may] benefit from the same requirements. In the past, when we were federated, we might have been slightly faster to market to deliver exactly what you needed, but it was so customized that it was not reusable," he said. "The real win is that we pause — and the bid agency may not always like that — but you slow down a bit for the sake of adding a greater value proposition hopefully at a lower cost."

As budgets grow smaller, teams must cut costs wherever possible. To add value without adding cost, even minor cuts here and there add up. Pausing to collect data and assess the usefulness of dated software and devices might result in funds that could be reallocated.

"Often the business lines within an organization are so busy, they're not thinking about that," the agency CIO said. "But it's all those small things that add up. That's where [as] IT organizations, it's our responsibility to make sure we're translating that, so informed decisions are made based on data. That's how you recoup the funding."

Modernization itself can make the process of collecting that information easier. Migrating to the cloud, for example, has enabled agencies to set up more transparent, data-driven budget structures.

"As we've moved to major cloud platforms, we intentionally set up the cost allocation infrastructure so we know exactly what the operating costs are for applications. That has come as a rude awakening for folks," said the CIO of a financial agency. "It's been good in terms of changing the question to 'what can I do to drive this cost down?' We would not have had that if we had not done the modernization."

The final pause for managing costs comes at the end of deployment. The launch of a new system or tool isn't complete until the old version gets decommissioned, panelists said. If some data or processes remain in the old system, the project isn't 100% delivered.

"They say no government program actually ends until you pull the plug out of the socket. If you take the entire cost of the system — internal, external and development contracts, and hosting contracts — and say there are 40 people that still use this antiquated system that costs x per year, then the question becomes, 'Do we really need this?'"

4. EIS transition can drive 'transformative' change

Fulfilling the EIS transition requirement was a major task for federal agencies. Though some stragglers remain, and the GSA has extended the deadline for a handful of agencies, panelists of this roundtable reported their own processes as mostly or fully complete.

Even when the transition is still a work in progress, agencies are already reaping the benefits, such as no longer wiring buildings that don't absolutely need it. Less wire going back to a circuit room requires less heating and cooling — all ancillary practical and financial benefits of modernization.

❚ Learn more ❚ about how Comcast Government Services partners with federal agencies on the journey toward network modernization.