

PRACTICE

## Empire State Aims to Make Interoperability Vision a Reality

To transform human services into a well-run business with satisfied customers, New York looks to Colorado as a model.

*By Dr. Daniel Chan, Brian Y. Scott and William E. Travis, Jr.*

**T**HE INABILITY OF THE human services systems to share information electronically or become “interoperable” has caused the cost of governing to soar and results in less than optimum outcomes for children and families. In addition, families that become involved in the human services paradigm find themselves required to provide redundant personal, financial and historical family information leading to a lack of data quality among the participating governmental entities.

### A Case in Point

Here is an example of an encounter involving a household in which an allegation that the 16-year-old has been abusing the 10-year-old is reported. A Child Protective Services caseworker is assigned to investigate and the prior CPS reports are easily accessible through the child welfare system. Information pertaining to prior mental health, education and medical records can be obtained only after having a parent sign a paper copy of a release of information, sending it to the provider, and receiving information via telephone, mail or fax, delaying the investigation findings.

The 16-year-old becomes involved with the judicial system, is remanded to the custody of the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) commissioner, court-ordered to attend substance abuse and mental health counseling, and is placed in a juvenile justice facility.

The caseworker is unable to view information regarding the child’s current diagnosis, progress in each counseling program and medication(s) prescribed. These services are maintained electronically through various other agencies/service provider systems.

Several days are spent requesting, receiving, reviewing and documenting the information. The mental health evaluation includes additional recommendations that the child attend an eight-week clinic for depression offered at the mental health office. However, since the information is not received in time for the current clinic session, he has to wait for the next one to begin.

The agencies and service providers involved in this example strive to serve the families of New York State. However, during the CPS investigation and while services are being provided to the family, the lack of collective and accessible information delays the necessary services to the family. In addition, each provider maintains and updates its own systems separately, resulting in unnecessary duplication of information. An automated, interoperable system that shares data among multiple service providers and multiple branches of government would result in lower cost of government and better outcomes for children and families.

It is no longer appropriate for agencies to invest taxpayer dollars in singular, agency-based solutions. Whether for gathering data, storing

data, creating images, storing images, authenticating identities, data centers, disaster recovery services, purchasing services, creating state employee-based organizations or achieving future commercial-product solutions, collective shared services solutions are essential. This strategy is appropriate for all levels of government and requires strong business and technical leadership at every level of government.

### Running Government Like a Business

Whenever discussion turns to the failings of government, mention is inevitably made of the need to run government like a business. Just as inevitably, the point is made that government is not a business and does not enjoy certain degrees of latitude afforded a private sector entity. This is, of course, the truth—for example, a private company can target or exclude a customer population much more easily than a government agency. But the underlying assumption remains: Private organizations achieve operational efficiency and reduce cost in ways that would be applicable in government, and government would be well served to understand and adopt these practices.

Newly elected Governor Andrew Cuomo's action plan, the New NY Agenda, is eloquent in its demand for change, and echoes the theme of applying private sector practice and innovation to public sector problems.

The business benefits of information technology became apparent to executives, researchers and practitioners alike as they began to understand where the greatest returns are to be found, according to an April 17, 2000, *InformationWeek* article:

"According to most executives, it's not just IT but the reengineering of business practices and processes in conjunction with IT that produces the biggest boosts in productivity. The technologies that contribute most are collaborative in nature, such as groupware and e-mail, and one of the most effective business-

process improvements is breaking down the walls between vertical business areas—where collaborative technologies can contribute."

Several themes here bear emphasis:

- While application of IT can enhance productivity, the greatest gains are made with clear understanding of the relationship between IT and business process—and, often, reengineering of business process.
- Collaborative technologies—and, presumably, technologies that enhance collaboration—provide the greatest return.
- Great value is gained by using these technologies to break down walls between vertical business areas—which, in government, are often organized as separate agencies, or more likely as separate programs within the same agency.

### The Colorado Model

When the State of Colorado began an IT consolidation effort in 2007, it was situated similarly to New York State—the state's tax revenues were dropping and the resources required to provide services exceeded the available funding, according to an August 8, 2010, *Government Technology* article.

The Colorado effort was formalized in 2008 with passage of IT consolidation legislation, which included innovation worth considering in New York State. Subsequent to this effort, Colorado began to understand the importance of data and business process and appointed its first chief data officer, using the following legislative language to facilitate information sharing between executive agencies:

*"House Bill 08-1364 directs the Governor's Office of Information Technology (OIT) to convene a Data Protocol Development Council ("Council") to assist in designing and implementing an interdepartmental data protocol.*



*The goal of the cross-departmental data protocol is to facilitate information sharing across agencies and assist in formulating and determining the effectiveness of state policies.*

*“The mission of the Council is to provide guidance, policies and procedures for implementing a data sharing architecture across the State enterprise that will achieve the stated goal and objectives of HB-1364. The Council is comprised of representatives from Executive Branch Agency and interested parties as deemed necessary by OIT.”*

### **Data Governance Colorado-Style**

The State of Colorado has appointed an officer with the responsibility to develop an understanding of its state business process and data. This function provides emphasis on government processes and programs, not technology. New York State must understand how we use data and how programs are related in order to create efficiency, improve service delivery, and decrease the size and cost of government. This function is complementary to that of the New York State chief information officer, who is responsible for technology standards and best practices across the New York State enterprise.

What is particularly compelling about the Colorado effort is that it is about government processes and programs, not technology. Colorado wants to understand how it uses data, and how programs are related, in order to create efficiency and improve service delivery.

Another aspect of the Colorado model essential for New York State to consider is the need to recruit and develop the next-generation IT workforce. We need to build employee skill sets through training and rely less on costly consultants. The workforce will need to be agile in order to decrease product time to market, and strategic training investments will be essential, as will the introduction of collaboration as a best practice supplemented by col-

laboration tools. These ideas may seem simple and logical, yet all CIOs remain challenged to develop a workforce with the skills necessary to run the business of New York State.

### **Save Money, Improve Services**

Shared services and interoperability are clearly crucial in reducing cost of government while enhancing services offered. Congruent with the information we've discussed, every state should consider:

**Shared services and IT governance.** Govern IT to maximize what is shared, live transparently and be responsive to program agency and IT executives.

**Enterprise content management.** Create a shared services ECM platform that will reduce barriers in using this technology, and reduce the cost of using, managing and maintaining records.

**Chief data officer.** Appoint a CDO who has an understanding of, and responsibility for, the state's business process and data holistically.

**Master data management.** Under the auspices of the CDO, initiate legislation eliminating barriers to data sharing using an open MDM project spanning several human services agencies.

**Identity management.** Initiate a process for all workers at all levels of government to receive directory services accounts as part of their employment. This will facilitate deployment of enterprise-scale applications.

**Innovation.** Create a platform for innovation. Engage the educational community to begin the creation of an applied research laboratory. Initial development of the proposal and budget should be a joint project including education, State CIO, State CDO, the CIO Council and the private sector.

(See the box on the previous page for more specifics about some of these concepts.)



### **Another Option to Achieve Interoperability**

An alternative for New York State is to partner with a local university to design and build a platform for innovation. This platform should be based on open source technologies and standards. We could brand this OpenNY, where software and hardware components can be shared, reused and enhanced by state agencies, private contractors and volunteers alike. This platform must be product-agnostic and subjected to transparent peer reviews.

Scholarly research has demonstrated that technologies developed under this paradigm have higher-quality, shorter development time/cost and engage broader community involvement, thus promoting a healthy competitive marketplace and creating new job opportunities to stop the brain drain from New York State, which like most other state governments could potentially lose 40 percent of its IT labor force to retirement in the next five years.

Initial development of the proposal and budget should be a joint project of the education, executive and CIO councils.

The authors have developed these concepts for consideration by Governor Cuomo's transition team.

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