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The Commissioner of Synergy

Promoting centralized IT services across a vast bureaucracy

By Michael Minelli and Mike Barlow

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Paul J. Cosgrave serves as commissioner of the New York City Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DoITT). A native New Yorker, Cosgrave has devoted a career to using the power of technology to make organizations more effective.

After more than 30 years of experience in both the public and private sectors, including three years as CIO of the Internal Revenue Service, Commissioner Cosgrave is now responsible for managing the world's largest and most complex municipal IT service operation.

DoITT provides service and support for the vast archipelago of agencies that compose city government. As the department's commissioner, one of Cosgrave's primary jobs is selling the idea of centralized, integrated IT services across the city's vast bureaucracy.

"City government is a very complex structure. There are some 80 different agencies, offices, boards and authorities, each with its own mission and its own traditions," says Cosgrave. "My chartered role at DoITT is bringing some synergy to the process. Basically, we're trying to make city services transparent, accountable and accessible to all New Yorkers."

DoITT operates the 311 system, which essentially functions as a colossal 24/7 help desk for anyone with non-emergency questions about municipal services in the five boroughs of New York City.

"311 is our landmark," Cosgrave says with obvious pride. "311 takes all the city's customer-facing responsibilities and pulls them together under one roof. It's truly a best practice."

Before 311, people with questions or complaints about garbage, noise or broken street lights would have to search through the telephone directory in hopes of finding the right agency to answer their questions.

In the old days, for example, if you saw an open fire hydrant, you probably would call the New York City Fire Department. While that would have seemed a logical course of action, it wouldn't solve the problem. Eventually, you would discover that you were supposed to call the Department of Environmental Protection to get the hydrant fixed. Meanwhile, hundreds of gallons of water could spill onto the street.

“311 took a bunch of 9-to-5 operations that weren’t really set up to handle customer calls and consolidated them into a fully professional 24/7 call center,” says Cosgrave. “It is a transformational project.”

A transformative project has deep, wide-ranging and permanent impact. Shepherding such projects through their various stages requires the skills of a masterful executive. In many respects, Cosgrave represents the future of IT management. At DoITT, technology is a mere component in a much larger framework of people and processes held together by a common vision.

Share the vision, not just the goal

Getting the 311 system up and running in a city the size of New York was no simple task. One of the early hurdles was convincing numerous local community boards that it was in their best interests to participate – even when it required them to yield a degree of local power.

In the absence of a central operation for processing complaints, the city’s 59 community boards had become important channels for transmitting complaints to City Hall, which gave the boards influence in their neighborhoods.

“They may have initially been wary of the idea of a centralized system,” Cosgrave recalls, “But I’ve met with them, opened the process and explained how they will become power users of the 311 system as we develop ideas to move it to the Internet. That has helped turn the tide, and now the boards are working with us to implement the new system.”

Cosgrave uses the story to illustrate a crucial point: Even in the most complicated IT scenarios, technology is rarely the primary issue.

“In fact, technology is almost never the main challenge,” he says. “The main challenge is always trying to demonstrate to people that they’ve got an important role to play and that you’re not just trying to shove something down their throats.”

In addition to managing the 311 system, DoITT also manages the city’s Web site (NYC.gov), its broadcast television station and five municipal cable channels, and a huge fiber network. DoITT is also overseeing the launch of the New York City Wireless Network (NYCWiN), which will give the city’s emergency responders high-speed data access to support large file transfers, fingerprints, mug shots, city maps, and full-motion, streaming video.

“All of that gives me a certain amount of leverage that a traditional CIO might not normally have,” says Cosgrave. While the additional leverage makes it easier for Cosgrave to encourage cooperation among various departments and agencies, it’s not a magic wand. One of his ongoing challenges is convincing the few remaining city agencies to accept a centralized email system.

“The ability to retrieve something as simple as an email message is critical to any government. At the same time, you have to remember that people become uncomfortable when they feel like they’re losing control. So you need to find a way to sell them on the idea.”

Cosgrave says that he tries to win over hesitant agency managers by arguing that a centralized service architecture is more economical, secure and flexible than a loosely-knit collection of point applications.

“My message to the agencies is this: You focus on the mission-critical tasks and I’ll concentrate on the infrastructure,” he says.

“Sometimes it’s an easy sell, and sometimes it isn’t. In some agencies, people dig in their heels and don’t want to change. It can be challenging, but you can succeed by convincing them that they’re not losing control.”

Sometimes the issues can be extremely granular. “We’ve had debates over who owns which piece of equipment, right down to the components of a LAN,” Cosgrave says.

Service level objectives can reduce tensions and overcome internal obstacles, he says. “People are more comfortable when you put it in writing. Service levels give you specific goals to measure yourself against. You can track your performance and prove that you’re honoring your commitments.”

DoITT is also charged with improving the city's 911 system. Here again, the major challenge is making sure that the stakeholders buy into the execution plan and understand how their roles and responsibilities fit into the overall vision.

The 911 project puts all of Cosgrave’s skills as a technologist, strategist, and salesman to the test. “As in any sales situation, the buyer’s perception of value is crucial to the deal,” he says. “So I keep selling the benefits.”



Michael Minelli and Mike Barlow are co-authors of “Partnering with the CIO: The Future of IT Sales Seen Through the Eyes of Key Decision Makers” (John Wiley & Sons, 2007).

This article is adapted from the book.