Defense CDO Promises Data Strategy This Month

Preparing data for AI use and ensuring all service members are able to leverage data are key.

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Defense Department Chief Data Officer David Spirk is aiming to submit the Defense Data Strategy to DOD leadership by Sept. 30, marking a new milestone for the military’s ability to leverage data as a strategic asset.

“We have a goal of getting the data strategy to the [Deputy Secretary of Defense’s] office by the 30th of this month,” Spirk said during Wednesday’s AFCEA DC conference. “We are staffing the final package ... but I think we’re close and ready to push it.”
Although Spirk did not detail the data strategy contents, he along with Air Force CDO Eileen Vidrine and Army CDO and Deputy CIO Greg Garcia emphasized that some of their data priorities include ensuring quality data for artificial intelligence and machine-learning capabilities, and that all service members are readily able to use data in their everyday work.

Though oftentimes it’s difficult for IT officials to gain buy-in from leadership for costly and culture-changing modernization initiatives, it’s the opposite case with data and automation at DOD, where top leadership views data and AI as critical tools to accelerate the services’ missions.

“The whole purpose of everything that we’re doing, from a data collection, curation, modern thoughtful storage front, is ultimately about making data that’s available for machine-learning application — full stop — so we have to walk in now with that as a mindset,” Spirk said. “Even if we’re not using it initially for that end, we have to walk in with that as a concept because whether it’s an advanced analytic capability that will be improved with machine learning or whether it’s just a future opportunity, we’ve got to step into it that way.”

Army senior leadership is invested in AI capabilities, recognizing that leveraging data as a strategic asset carries “game-changing capability,” Garcia added. To help meet this demand, the Army has established programs like Prometheus, a machine-learning algorithm that processes satellite data into usable targeting data.

The Air Force is also invested in advancing “future AI" by partnering with leading technological and academic institutions to pioneer new innovations in automation and AI.

“In the department of the Air Force this fiscal year, they stood up an AI accelerator at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where we could leverage some of the smartest people in AI in the academic world to be looking at not just AI of today, but AI of the future,” Vidrine said. “Between the work that Army Futures Command is doing and some of these other forward-leaning entities like these huge partnerships with very strong, leading-edge academic institutions is going to be a game-changer as we move forward.”
To prepare DOD’s data for automated purposes, Spirk said that he wants to implement an enterprise cloud solution for data storage and use, as the cloud will simultaneously bring centralized storage and the ability to have distributed operational capability across the military enterprise.

While setting up military data for AI and machine-learning applications is a priority for DOD’s top CDOs, so is making sure that personnel have a data-forward mindset to work. This, the CDOs said, will ensure that all members of the military can leverage data-driven decision-making in their everyday work by fostering a data-minded culture.

“Every single soldier, airman, sailor, Coast Guardsman is really a data officer in the future,” Garcia said. “Every single individual, no matter what their speciality is has to think about data and what data can they provide, what data can they consume to improve mission outcome. It’s through that culture of every single person on the battlespace is actually responsible and a consumer of some sort of data, either in providing it, receiving it or enriching it.”

The Air Force has been implementing this ideation, not only at the base levels of work with its new data science internship program, but also by assigning data officers throughout the enterprise, ensuring that there’s a level of data-centered governance across the service.

“One of the big core areas that we’ve focused on in the last few months is really making sure that we have a strong governance perspective moving forward,” Vidrine said. “We’ve stood up our governance forums, as well as assigning or appointing data officers at every level of the Air Force, so every major command, every functional lead has their ... designated point of contact, so that they are leading at each and every level across the department. And I think that helps identify, very quickly, what’s working well and where we have areas or opportunities to really drive change quickly.”

Vidrine added that normalizing a data-minded workforce will help enable her and other IT leaders across her organization to deliver data and solutions with their customers rather than providing a product for the customer.
The CDOs delivered their priorities in a relatively uniformed fashion, signaling that these values will formulate a cohesive Defense Data Strategy soon. The DOD has been eyeing a joint data strategy for over a year now, since previous DOD CDO Michael Conlin mentioned the initiative. Spirk’s aim to finalize the initiative will mark a milestone for the military.

DOD's data strategy will also follow civilian agencies' 10-year data strategy, which the Office of Management and Budget finalized last year, emphasizing leveraging data as a strategic asset.

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