

Former VA CIO's 6 Steps to Innovation Success

And the department's upcoming IT projects where these steps can be applied.

[Amanda Ziadeh](#)

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As the former acting chief information officer and executive in charge of the Office of Information Technology at the Veterans Affairs Department, Scott Blackburn learned quite a bit during his four years serving under two secretaries.

Blackburn announced his [resignation](#) April 17, but took to the stage at the GITEC Summit in Annapolis, Maryland. April 23 to discuss his commitment to the service of veterans, reflect on the health IT successes he worked on ([Vets.Gov](#), [VA Reach Vet](#) and community care tools) and list the upcoming IT projects at VA.

But he also transformed his experience at VA to “six keys to successful innovation in government,” and considering the rate of modernization in government — or

attempts — his tips are timely and relevant:

Create the culture: Instill persistence and drive within the agency. Make people feel empowered, provide the leadership and confidence that a difference can be made, and provide an atmosphere of gratitude, positivity, trust and support.

Leverage the greater purpose as a common denominator: Focus on the mission and values of the agency, and where it needs to go. When you direct efforts toward agency mission, everything else will follow, including the secondary agendas.

Work customer-out: This is the common thread of all VA's IT initiatives. Blackburn said he's taken a human-centered design approach to understand what vets need, how they want to interact with VA, what clinicians and call center reps need, and design outward. VA used to build things in silos, making the user experience "choppy." So, think in terms of customers and front lines.

Build capabilities in the organization that will be everlasting: Human-centered design is key, be collaborative through private and public partnerships and open up two-way feedback. Build innovative capabilities along the way those coming in after can and will continue to expand.

Follow fast: "Skate to the puck" and know your competition. It's not true government lacks competition, Blackburn said. Vets are members of private health care service providers, so they expect a certain experience. "We need to keep up," he said, "we don't necessarily have to be at the cutting edge, but we do have to be a fast follower." So, understand the changing innovations in technologies in the consumer world, and go after them.

Design to scale: Focus on user-friendliness, flexibility and making new services viral. Typically, agencies are great at forming ideas, especially with private sector help. They can even manage pilots, but "where we really struggle is the third step: executing and scaling," Blackburn said. So, think about how to scale innovations across the enterprise, and design to scalability.

Future of VA IT

A lot of work still remains to be done, and innovations in the works. VA has open data efforts like the [Lighthouse Lab](#), a computer platform that invites software developers to use VA tools to create mobile and web applications that help vets

better manage care, services and benefits.

Blackburn said VA also wants to transform the benefits experience into TurboTax-style claims, and is building on its [Open Application Programming Interface Pledge](#). This pledge encourages health care providers to work with VA to map health data to industry standards and exchange data. Ultimately, this will create an app economy around health care, where third parties can go in and create apps.

As part of its digital strategy, Blackburn said VA will eventually migrate away from Vets.Gov and consolidate everything on VA.Gov, including benefits and scheduling. And as far as the electronic health record modernization plan goes, Blackburn is hopeful VA will move forward soon with the [Cerner](#) Corp. implementation.

The goal is “getting out of that business of trying to do everything ourselves as the VA; that’s not our core capability, we’re not very good at software development,” Blackburn said, but rather leverage the best of private sector.

And though VA still has a lot on its [plate](#), Blackburn is optimistic new leadership will continue the momentum.

“Very excited to hand over the baton, and very hopeful that the next team will continue on and build on the projects that we’ve made,” he said.

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