White House Embarks on Federal Data Strategy

“We can’t use the data if we don’t understand it,” federal CIO says.

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Wed, 06/06/2018 - 16:59

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The President’s Management Agenda identifies data, accountability and transparency as a key driver of transformation. But to use data efficiently, agencies need to understand their data and how it can improve services for citizens, Suzette Kent, federal chief information officer in the Office of Management and Budget, said at the June 6 Data Coalition Demo Day in Washington, D.C.
One of the leading principles of the PMA is taking a governmentwide and cross-agency approach to transformation success, so each key driver is assigned Cross Agency Priority, or CAP, goals, to effectively target the areas where multiple agencies can work together and publicly report progress.

The CAP goal for data is to “leverage the data across the government to solve complex public challenges,” Kent said.

The Commerce Department alone collects more than 20 terabytes of data a day, and today’s technology allows us to process that much data in seconds — but to harness the potential of computing capabilities and massive data sources, data needs to be structured and standardized.

“We can’t use the data if we don’t understand it,” Kent said. This starts with setting a foundation of common standards across government and establishing comprehensive data hygiene and agreed upon common-use protocols while ensuring strict protection of individual privacy.

Part of that involves rethinking security around data and aligning how data moves, what to do with it when it’s at rest, and moving beyond a parameter-based approach to security around the information.

“From a cyberposture, we’re changing the concept of high-value assets to not necessarily be about applications, but to be about the data, that’s what's important,” Kent said.

But ultimately, the goal is to create a data-powered government with data-driven insights that inform how leaders manage government and improve the way it serves the public. And like any expansive, ambitious goal like this, “we have to start with the basics, and we have to make sure we have a rock-solid foundation,” Kent said.

**It Starts with Strategy**

So, in this CAP goal are two main work streams: strategy and incubator. The first is a long-term federal data strategy of real-life work that will prove the principles the PMA outlines. But they won’t be right the first time. In fact, it’ll take time and collaboration of experts in government, industry, academia and research. According
to the PMA, this strategy will “accelerate and scale these practices into a logical, integrated and coordinated path forward to achieve meaningful results.”

And though the plan is defined as long-term, Kent said the Office of the CIO is looking very “tactically and immediately and urgently” at how to solve some specific problems today, to demonstrate the power of data and use those starting points to build the broader strategy (and eventually, continuously evolve that strategy).

**Putting Data to Work**

The incubator stream will assess solutions of use cases to establish rules around data hygiene and sharing, data architectures and structures, and principles around what data should be public and the best mechanisms for that.

These use cases will involve very complex but specific multiagency and industry-specific challenges. The plan is to apply small pieces of data to those hygiene and sharing standards, potential interagency agreements if needed, to start thinking about data accessibility and privacy.

Defining those use cases is still in the works, but Kent said they’ll be in health, homeland security, state and local government, and financial management.

“Those areas we feel fairly confident will help us prove those guiding principles and give us lessons,” she said.

This will be the “fuel for how we build a long-term strategy,” Kent added, and this approach will bleed into other PMA CAP goals too. “We’re going to apply the disciplines that we’re defining and the work that we’re doing and use those as learning cases.”

**Scaling for the Future**
The foundation for these standards need to be explored now, but have to come with longevity, because it’s not clear what the use cases of the future will be. But doing this now coincides with the government’s overall tech journey, as agency leaders are being asked to use applications, make decisions about moving data to the cloud and architecting zero trust networks.

“Those types of things require discipline, and a deep understanding of data,” Kent said. These two initiatives complement each other, and help form the foundation needed.

And then, there’s the commitment to transparency. Kent said the Office of the CIO will be reporting its goals and results quarterly on Performance.Gov, as well as further details of the CAP goal data plans.

Ultimately, Kent believes this strategy will create the power for future analytics, machine learning, deep learning and artificial intelligence to actually leverage and use large volumes of data.

“These foundations help us establish the business approach for enabling those additional capabilities,” she said.

The data CAP goal is led by members from Commerce, the Small Business Administration's Information Policy and Performance Offices and the Office of Science and Technology Policy.