

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID NICHOLL

Chris Bishop interviewed David Nicholl, the Corporate Chief Information Technology Officer for the Government of Ontario in April, 2009.

Q. The planning process has been more rigorous over the last two years. What benefits has this delivered?

A. In the last two years, Ontario has made real progress in ensuring that its IT planning process is both “bottom up” to align with ministry priorities and “top down” to address enterprise-wide priorities such as the Guelph Data Centre and the modernization of legacy applications. We have also continued our tradition of ensuring that our annual IT plans are informed by our multi-year Beyond e-Ontario strategic plan.

Adding additional rigor to our IT planning processes has allowed the IT organization to better manage, evolve and improve the way I&IT is delivered - maximizing benefits provided to our OPS business clients.

Our planning process continues to mature. Our goal is to support strategic decision-making that informs long-term investments in I&IT; facilitate portfolio management of the I&IT environment, and link I&IT planning to investment decisions and capacity management.

Q. The MAPS strategy has now received significant funding. What steps are you taking to ensure that this will be a successful program?

A. The Major Application Portfolio Strategy (MAPS) funding was obtained to modernize and remediate major business applications at risk caused by aging systems. We have a program in place that reviews our application inventory and identifies high risk applications. Plans are made at the ministry/cluster level to fix or replace these systems at risk. The MAPS project funding will be used to support those cluster projects.

We will be using our governance structure (the I&IT Deputies Committee and the Information Technology Executive Leadership Council) to govern this process.

At the top of the governance pyramid is the I&IT Deputies Committee (IITDC), co-chaired by myself and the Ministry of Revenue Deputy, Carol Layton. It is comprised of key Deputy Ministers from across the Ontario government, it provides strategic direction, ensures alignment of I&IT with government business directions, provides leadership in certain areas, and ensures that information technology is used to full effect in supporting public service transformation.

The governing body of the I&IT community is the Information Technology Executive Leadership Council (ITELC), chaired by myself and comprised of the CIOs of the various clusters, along with the corporate chiefs responsible for Infrastructure, Strategy, Technology, Information, Privacy and Security.

The I&IT governance, along with regular reports back to Management Board of Cabinet, will help to ensure the success of this program.

Q. Do you expect COTS solutions to play an important role in the MAPS program?

A. Definitely. The OPS direction is to reuse what we already have. If that fails, we then “buy” Commercial-off-the-Shelf (COTS). And if that is not possible, we will then build the system as a last resort.

Q. What kinds of Government 2.0 activities are being deployed or considered for deployment?

A. The use of Web 2.0 for e-collaboration is a key component of our Beyond e-Ontario strategic plan.

As such, we have embraced a number of Web 2.0 tools for communications, service delivery, policy development and administration. Some examples include: Blogs, Podcasts, Video sharing, Wikis, RSS, Social bookmarking, Tag clouds, Mashups, Professional networking, Collaboration workspaces and Virtual worlds.

Many of the new technologies for participation and interaction are being piloted internally first, to make sure we get it right when we go public. Blogs are a good example of this. Our Deputy Minister, Ron McKerlie, has a blog which garners comments and questions from staff. This has really opened up the lines of communications internally. He also used a public wiki to enlist the help of our staff in developing themes for his annual Showcase Ontario keynote speech.

Most of our websites offer RSS feeds to allow users to receive updates and share content and engage in social bookmarking. We have podcasts which are being produced by the Premier, the Chief CIO and several ministries.

Finally, we’ve developed an award-winning Second Life site showcasing Ontario as a place for young professionals to come and work. We’ve also launched a pilot corporate wiki called “OPSpedia” which provides staff with online wiki, blog and professional network tools.

Q. The VOR process experienced a number of delays last year. Are any changes planned for the I&IT procurement processes?

A. The timeline associated with the establishment of the IT consulting VORs in 2008-09 was a function of the large volume of proposals received by our Supply Chain Management organization. It reflected the time and real effort it took to give each proposal a thorough and fair evaluation, and to work through the (still new) contractor security screening process as the final stage of the evaluation process. The Ministry of Government Services (MGS) is evaluating this experience and will be determining how things could be done in a more streamlined approach in the future.

MGS is also working to modernize procurement processes to reduce barriers to entry and cut costs for vendors, develop standardized contracts that address vendor concerns about onerous Terms & Conditions and risk balance; all while continuing to be fair, open, and transparent and provide value for money for the taxpayers of Ontario.

MGS is working on a business case for an electronic supply chain management approach. This would allow future procurement processes to be undertaken in a much more efficient manner. This would include: the potential for electronic bid filing; reducing the amount of mandatory submission documentation required for procurement from vendors; and electronic evaluation of bids. It would also include a robust base of information from which Supply Chain Management decisions can be more easily made in support of government objectives.

Vendors are also going to be seeing an increased emphasis in the future, where appropriate, on green requirements, sustainability (e.g., cradle to re-birth of products), and support for the economy by encouraging innovation in products.

Q. The Open for Business initiative has aggressive goals for reducing the administrative burden for business. What impact do you think this will have on IT projects?

On March 6, 2009, the Premier announced the Open For Business (OFB) strategy as an ongoing plan to make government faster and friendlier for families and businesses while still protecting the public good.

As part of the strategy, the government has committed to create open and responsive collaboration between government and business; reduce the burden of government regulation on business; implement enhanced, single-access point services and products, coupled with service guarantees, and create a modern regulatory environment that fosters competitiveness and welcomes new business.

Each of these initiatives will require I&IT investments to support the government's Open for Business objectives.

Q. There has been a fear of undertaking large projects in the government. What steps are being taken to mitigate political fear of big projects and build the capacity to make projects successful?

A. The Ontario government has been concerned about the performance of certain large I&IT projects in the earlier part of the decade.

The government has taken steps to manage projects more successfully, by appointing a Special Task Force on the management of large-scale I&IT technology projects. The Task Force made a number of recommendations which the government has implemented. These measures ensure thorough and diligent vetting of project proposals before they are launched. They also ensure projects are properly supervised by sponsors throughout the post-approval lifecycle.

Approval of smaller, less-risky, projects has been delegated to an executive-level committee (known as the Information and Information Technology Project Approval Committee, or ITPAC). Management Board of Cabinet (MBC) now concentrates on large, high-risk projects.

Before going to MBC, large I&IT project proposals are first vetted by central agency staff and then also reviewed by ITPAC. The ITPAC review ensures that projects are aligned with the government strategy and priorities, have a solid business case, and that inherent project risks are identified and mitigated. The review also ensures resources are available to complete the project, that a governance structure is in place, and that a basic architecture review has been done. As a result, MBC knows that large project proposals comply with a sound standard of thoroughness and are properly conceived and planned. This gives them greater confidence in approving large projects and more structured project information.

We do not just approve large, high-risk projects and leave it at that, though. We have instituted a Major I&IT Projects Report (MPR), which reports on all ongoing large I&IT projects every fiscal quarter. This report gives MBC a concise summary of how large projects, previously approved, are doing in terms of cost control and scheduled implementation. Data to complete the report is provided to central agency staff and vetted, and a performance rating (green, yellow, red) assigned. Projects that do not get a green rating are expected to provide a go-forward action plan to get the project back on track.

MBC considers the MPR a useful monitoring process, as it enables them to be current and informed on large projects involving significant public expenditure. It also provides them with an early warning system where projects are, or are in danger of, underperforming. Now, where a project is in trouble, we will know sooner rather than later, and the project can be stopped, changed, or have other remedial action taken. This also increases the chance, where there is failure, of so-called “successful failure”, i.e., detecting and addressing an unsuccessful project early, before it becomes a black hole and large resources have been sunk, and (worst of all) this failure coming as a surprise to the government.

The MPR gives Ministers a lot more confidence and comfort approving a large, complex project when it knows that it will be monitored on an ongoing basis as part of an open and transparent process.

We have also implemented a Gateway review process for I&IT projects, so that reviews are taken at key stages of a project to ensure that the project is ready to progress to the next stage of development or implementation.

Because we want to make sure that what we are doing truly responds to the Task Force recommendations, we’ve had the Ontario Internal Audit Division review our progress. We are taking steps to address the few small areas that have been identified in the reviews.

One of the issues identified by the Task Force was the need to build capacity to ensure projects have a high chance of succeeding.

We have established a variety of Centres of Excellence. For example, the I&IT project management Centre of Excellence, provides advice and assistance to ministries and clusters, especially in relation to the system development lifecycle and project portfolio management.

We have a sophisticated architecture review process, both in clusters and enterprise-wide. This process includes the vetting of project proposals both at the initial business architecture phase but also at each architecture checkpoint throughout the system development lifecycle. This ensures consistent architecting using common standards and artifacts. We have an applied architecture branch that provides assistance to projects on artifact development to ensure consistency and quality. We are also standardizing a large suite of common components and applications to achieve efficiencies and cost savings in solution development.

Most, if not all, of our large I&IT projects involve significant procurements. Our Supply Chain Management group vets project procurement plans in business cases and also provides expert I&IT procurement advice to projects, including advice on Vendor of Record arrangement rules and processes.

Our federated model concentrates all I&IT resources within clusters, allowing clusters to develop sophisticated, dedicated I&IT service organizations, and leaving ministries to manage day-to-day program activities.

We are also focusing on staff development. We have a Talent Management process that will enable us to ensure that our employees continue to have the skills and capabilities to deliver quality public services. This is achieved by assessing what we have, developing skill sets, and most importantly, deploying our talent.

We are also building our capacity by hiring more internal I&IT staff, instead of using consultants. This has the benefit of retaining knowledge in the organization, and it also has the benefit of being less costly.

Q. Are there any other issues you would like to draw to my attention?

- A. It's not an issue, but rather a key success factor for the ongoing management of IT in the OPS and that is, the IT vendor relationship - a key enabler for the OPS to achieve its goals.

Thank you