Five Strategic Considerations for IT Modernization
Federal IT modernization might be best understood by the story of the fabled city of EnterpriseVille. Here, the city’s infrastructure used to be spectacular but more recently it is aging and inconsistent. So, the mayor told the city planner to take out all the old assets and improve it.

Soon, the enterprising city became a modern marvel with brand new smart buildings, a flawless communications system, and auto-sensing utility distribution. Not to diminish this feat, the most amazing thing is, they did it in less than a month! A little high-level planning, a letter to the residents, and things just...fell into place. The mayor, city planner, and municipal workers were all pleased, and the residents were overjoyed with the change.

Imagine the glory...

Now, pull your head out of that daydream and you’ll realize this fable isn’t true and it isn’t realistic. It’s a tale of a city that approached modernization without a strategic plan, followed the shiny objects, and didn’t do what it takes during execution for successful results.

Government leaders can learn from the mayor, CIOs from the city planner, and unit chiefs from the municipal workers. Regardless of which role you play, the IT infrastructure is a key component in your city and your residents rely on you to protect, maintain, and improve it.

So, you are the city planner and the mayor set the objectives holding you accountable to make it all happen. Once the concrete dries and the last tree is planted, it’s the mayor and residents who will stand judging and your level of success will be directly correlated to the how solid your plan is.

Here are five strategic considerations to ensure you exceed their expectations:

1. **Accountability is not a lonely position**

   As the city planners, success is sweetest when celebrated with your team. So, don’t hesitate to get the whole city involved. Successfully modernizing your city’s infrastructure and applications will require buy-in and all the expertise at your disposal, at every stage of the process. Your municipal workers and trusted advisors will provide valuable minds during planning and execution. There are only a handful who are accountable, but there should be plenty who are responsible. Delegation to your entire team offers improvements in oversight and execution due to balanced workloads which leads to improved focus on the details. Additionally, this distribution allows modernization to be appropriately paced with increased ability to course correct. Create your team and move at a comfortable pace with the first project. The extra time will allow trust to be earned by your team and the dynamic will be repeatable with each iteration allowing for lessons learned and gained momentum. The result is trust and the success will yield staff and residents lined up to be involved again.

2. **Consider stakeholders when considering innovation**

   Get stakeholders involved early in the plan and keep them informed at each step when executing on innovations. CIOs should avoid forcing modernization faster than end users can realistically absorb it because of the risk and potential for negative impact. Modernization before thorough planning and testing leads to more than employees without their systems. Ultimately, United States citizens are affected. For example, maintaining high-security scores for your new systems will require prompt patching and changes which can lead to unusable applications if you aren’t careful. So, be planned and
be paced. Modernizing to quickly could result in flawed applications causing some residents to break out the pitchforks and some U.S. citizens to break out the pens for letters to their congressperson due to delays in important services.

3. **Create a common operating view**

Considering risk when planning is a given and IT security is a must when evaluating risk. But, make sure to consider all aspects during your risk evaluation. Beyond clear risks, take the time to thoroughly understand processes, collect feedback from system owners, and analyze user tendencies within your enterprise to create a common operating view. Doing so enables innovation success by avoiding process changes that could have cascading and adverse effects on other agency goals or negative impacts to support. It is wise to do a thorough assessment of each system or application during innovation planning to minimize the potential for unintended negative outcomes. A common operating view requires anyone at the planning or design level to truly understand the way your residents work. Your municipal workers play a key part here and this lends itself to the point of first suggestion above as it takes the group to determine the full picture.

4. **True-Up the ROI by working right to left**

Maybe a ghastly suggestion, but ROI can be more than just your initial numbers. Working with unit chiefs and application owners, it is wise to begin the planning with your intended outcomes (i.e. starting at the right). Once formulated, work with department heads to gather their goals and include them in the next level of your plan accordingly. Ensuring you really achieve your defined business outcomes requires collaborating within and sometimes across the agency components about the lower level steps of the plan (i.e. ending at the left). During this exercise, the first step to achieving true ROI is finding the balance in the final innovation plan that maximizes the quantity of collective goals while minimizing the impact on the initially defined outcomes. This exercise is needed because modernization isn’t quite the panacea for the aging infrastructure and considering intangible value along with thorough cost evaluation is important. Anytime you consolidate, migrate, or modernize systems you incur costs beyond the systems themselves. For example, IT consolidation can separate clinicians from applications causing a reduction in productivity or overall inefficiencies in delivering health care. The alternative is an increase in bandwidth/speed of your network which can offset some initial projected cost savings. So, make sure you are balanced, start your plan with your outcomes, and work backwards from there.

5. **Modernized applications are maximized by a prepared user base**

The best engineers think within the boundaries of their engineering world. They know it, they love it, they’re GREAT at building high-quality things. But, the gauge for the most well-built things often measures the most usable things, whether that be cities or systems. To that end, true success is predicated on a high level of preparedness toward education and a low difficulty for absorbing training material. So, be proactive. Throughout all the steps and all the end user tips above, make sure you are gathering the right intel. Understand processes, application usage, or changes in new applications and ensure you have a training team involved from the start. Most residents are OK with changes if they’re informed and understand what they’re working with. But, learning styles differ. So, create a plan to accommodate for multiple methods of training delivery that are repeatable and consumable. For example, try having bite-sized “how to” instructions that logically fit into a grouping of SOPs which can
be explained via video-based instruction. Doing so allows end users to consume when they need it and in the way, they each learn best. When your end users are complimenting the “new system” because they understand it, you know your judgment of success will be high. When the mayor hears that all the residents are happy, it’s safe to assume you’ll have cheers from both sides who stand judging.

So, regardless of what you’re about to modernize, success requires an emphasis on involvement, detailed planning, being operationally prepared, educating users, and maintaining a steady, comfortable pace. If you make too many hasty shifts then you’ll have some residents moving out of your city, don’t make enough and the mayor won’t see progress.