

STATE TECH

VISION

Special Report: State CIO 2023-2024 Interview Series

IT leaders play a pivotal role in shaping the ever-changing technology landscape within state governments across the nation. From budgeting and workforce development to digital transformation and increasing cybersecurity concerns, these leaders have an array of pressing tasks to address daily.

In this issue of the State Tech Vision CIO Interview Series, MeriTalk's Senior Advisor for SLG, John Thomas Flynn, former Massachusetts and California CIO and President of NASCIO, sat down with three state chief information officers to get a close look into their state IT endeavors:

- **Raja Sambadam**, Cabinet Secretary and State Chief Information Officer, New Mexico Department of Information Technology
- **Jim Weaver**, Secretary and State Chief Information Officer, North Carolina Department of Information Technology
- **Terrence Woods**, State Chief Information Officer, State of Oregon

This report takes a deep-dive into how technology modernization is progressing across the country, with executive commentary from leading industry technology professionals.

MeriTalk Interview 1: / Oregon Assistant CIO Crucial to Modernization Effort

State organizations are often confusing labyrinths – and difficult for laymen and even policy wonks to clearly understand – but in the case of Oregon state government IT functions the line of responsibility is clear with state Chief Information Officer (CIO) Terrence Woods reporting directly into Gov. Tina Koteck as a member of her cabinet.

Unfortunately, that kind of direct reporting arrangement between state leadership and the state CIO is still relatively rare, with only a dozen or so instances around the country, according to National Association of State Chief Information Officers Director Doug Robinson.

Woods said in an interview with MeriTalk that the direct reporting line to the governor has been critical to creating a successful IT environment in Oregon – echoing a stance that every state CIO with cabinet status has told me over the years.

After nearly two decades in Oregon state government with IT leadership positions at the revenue department, human services, and enterprise information services (EIS), he took over for state CIO Alex Pettit on an interim basis, and then was selected to the permanent position in 2018 by then-Gov. Kate Brown.

To say modernization has been key to Oregon's IT turnaround is an understatement.

Inheriting numerous state government computer systems using green screen dinosaur-age monitors, Woods faced a huge challenge.

Government technology is key to providing so much in the way of modern citizen services and enterprise business activity from the motor vehicle registry, health and welfare, and taxes,

along with budgeting, payroll and other internal business services.

Without proper technology none of this would be possible, and with antiquated technology the results themselves are inadequate.

However, Woods understands the key to modernization.

“I’m always going to say this, and I’ll keep beating this drum until one day we get it figured out. Change is really, really hard in general,” he said.

“And I would say change is even harder in state government largely because you have so many agencies, driven by their missions – in our case 72 boards, commissions, agencies, each with a different mission, and most of them service driven,” he explained.

Government service provider Paylt emphasized the need for modernization as well. “Modernization is the key to unlocking a brighter future for government IT infrastructure and elevating the customer experience. Unfortunately, many government agencies find themselves constrained by outdated technology, impeding their ability to adapt swiftly. The solution lies in decoupling the customer experience from the backend systems, providing agencies with the flexibility to enhance digital services for citizens without the prerequisite of overhauling their legacy technology stack.”

As a result, modernization of key legacy applications running in any of these 72 entities, their business rules, regulations, reporting requirements and so on, presents an enormous change management challenge.

To address this challenge, Woods adopted what I call a Sir Francis Bacon-like strategy -



if the mountain won't come to you,
you must go to the mountain.

Even with his cabinet-level status with other agencies, presenting change management proposals with persuasion and diplomacy - or even less tactful overtures, recalcitrant agencies might not be amenable to modernizing legacy systems that are ancient but still functioning.

That's where the Governor's Action Plan for IT was the catalyst. EIS was charged with organizing its Assistant State Chief Information Officers (ASCIO) program to develop a consistent, coordinated, and collaborative multi-year modernization strategies for each of the six program policy verticals - Administrative and Business Services, Education, Health, Natural Resources, Public Safety, and Transportation and Economic Development.

The development of individual agency modernization action plans was foundational to this work, as was the establishment of common definitions, templates, assessment tools, and repeatable processes, including development of business-driven agency IT Strategic plans.

Beyond these specific deliverables, however, is the secret sauce. ASCIOs are also tasked with building trusted relationships with their agency partners and promoting the values embedded within the modernization vision for Oregon - encompassing people, processes, and technology -and serving as a guide to agencies as they embark upon their journeys towards digital transformation.

It's those kinds of efforts that are forming the basis to establishing Oregon's digital/citizen service priorities for the year ahead, and paving the way for an increase in the adoption of digital services statewide.

View the article here:

meritalkslg.com/articles/meritalk-interview-oregon-assistant-cio-crucial-to-modernization-effort

MeriTalk Interview 2: / From CISO to CIO, New Mexico IT Leader has Seen it All

From laying cable throughout his college campus to heading up the state government's information technology organization in New Mexico, state CIO Raja Sambandam has come a long way. However, he's used to it.

Sambandam earned a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Madras, India, and his master's degree in management from South Dakota State University. He later worked for 20 years in information technology and business in the areas of banking, finance, taxation, healthcare, and manufacturing.

With the state government in New Mexico for a decade now, Sambandam has held the role of Chief Risk and Security Officer for the Taxation and Revenue Department (TRD) where he established the security, risk, and compliance functions for TRD. In addition, he oversaw TRD's Internal Audit Function. Sambandam joined the Department of Information Technology (DoIT) in April of 2020 as State Chief Information Security Officer (CISO).

In June 2023 Sambandam was named the Acting Cabinet Secretary and State CIO. He oversees an annual operational budget of around \$70 million and 165 employees.

An "acting" part of any title has a degree of uncertainty that is universal and in a state CIO position, it's no different. "This is something that they asked me to take on, so I am happily working and delivering on that. That is where it is right now. I do not know what happens next," Sambandam said.

As state CIO at DoIT, his department's primary responsibility is to provide certain core services.

“It includes being the system custodian and providing technology support and the technology aspects of our ERP system, which is the fabric that connects every single state government employee. And there's only a few fabrics that connect every single employee in terms of technology,” Sambandam explained.



ERP is the statewide accounting and budgeting application, a PeopleSoft subsystem that is housed at DoIT while the process owners are finance and the state personnel offices. “We also provide the statewide office productivity suite of applications which is Microsoft Office, and all the product features, and the functionalities associated with it,” Sambandam said. That covers the entire State Executive Branch ecosystem, 75 agencies, boards, and commission.

I explained that I recalled when the first CISO positions were created in the mid 1990s. Then the role changed from a deputy CIO to the new chief information security officer, and now it’s set up in certain states as a completely independent department. That’s what Sambandam had in New Mexico. It’s interesting that he was CISO, but independent from the state CIO. Then all of a sudden, he becomes the boss, the state CIO, so his perspective on the independence of the CISO might have changed over time.

“Having worked in banking and financial services, which, in my opinion at least, is one of the most structured IT environments because of the compliance aspect, because of the money aspect, every single internal control that you can think of has to be vetted, validated, and signed off on,” Sambandam said. That’s because of the Treasury regulations, because of the FDIC requirements, because of the Patriot Act, and any other banking requirements. It is very methodical and very structured.

“Having gained that insight into how that system operates, there are some lessons learned for other process owners in terms of understanding the maturity and the structure around it.”

Then when the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) issued Special Publication 800-53, it provided a framework for collaboration. “For example, if Department

of Health and Human Services says, ‘Oh, we are HIPPA compliant’, then the Department of Public Safety says, ‘Oh, we are CJIS compliant’. We don’t need to view them as a silo.”

Internal controls are internal controls. They need to exist. “Since that is the framework that we all subscribe to, and that’s the framework that the feds are pushing to, we wanted to leverage that framework, to bring those federated silos, because the state operated very similar to many other states, a federated, fragmented enterprise.”

New Mexico was looking for synergies to produce economies of scale. That’s the whole intent and spirit of the department of IT that was created in the mid 2000s. “But how do we gain that leverage? That’s the question. We looked at various different alternatives, but having this as governance and oversight functions, it can be achieved appropriately by providing that level of independence, and then that level of transparency.”

The CIO who’s the operational owner of IT should be doing so under the guidance of the system. “There was a subtle opportunity for conflict of interest and some undue influence, and those are some of the things that the private industry was trying to address.”

And so the independent CISO was born.

“There is a perceived notion that risk management or risk assessments are still considered an administrative nightmare, but without understanding the risks, you cannot put in mitigating controls to bring it to an acceptable or a tolerable level,” he said.





Having that separation between the CIO and CISO provides the ability to develop a control structure in such a way that is acceptable.

There are just a few states like New Mexico, including Arizona and New Jersey, with independent CISOs, but with the vast, ever expanding cyber threats to government continuity, state executives, especially in the governors' offices, are closely examining this situation and their governments reaction and organizational response to it.

Figure on seeing more examples of independent CISO, and even governors' direct reports, in the future. The failure of this function is a potential nightmare for elected officials.

Government service provider Paylt weighed in on how state CIOs can make IT modernization happen, particularly when the applications being modernized are the legacy systems 'owned' by program agencies and not the state itself: "Our partners are successful because they are laser-focused on delivering solutions built around the residents they serve. Look for technology solutions that prioritize the user experience, are cloud-native, and are composable- three qualities that empower every agency to deliver immediate value to their residents and continue expanding over time."

View the article here:

meritalkslg.com/articles/meritalk-qa-from-ciso-to-cio-new-mexico-it-leader-has-seen-it-all



MeriTalk Interview 3: / The Intrepid NC State CIO Continues His Multistate Leadership

James “Jim” Weaver began his state IT leadership role as chief technology officer (CTO) and deputy chief information officer (CIO) in Pennsylvania, followed by a very successful stint as CIO for the state of Washington, then was lured back east to North Carolina by Gov. Roy Cooper in 2021.

In Raleigh, Weaver became cabinet secretary and state CIO joining the North Carolina Department of Information Technology (NCDIT), and has more than 30 years of leadership and management in the IT industry.

As secretary and CIO, he leads the agency responsible for strategic IT planning and the procurement and delivery of IT services and solutions as well as cybersecurity and efforts to expand broadband access and affordability across North Carolina.

Prior to NCDIT, Weaver served as director and state CIO at Washington Technology Solutions. In that role, he strengthened the department and the state enterprise by focusing on efficiency; consistency and continuous improvement; driving business alignment; balancing operations and policy; and seeking quicker adoption of newer technology.

One interesting aspect of Weaver’s CIO journey was his personal interview with Washington Gov. Jay Inslee. “I remember the one question he asked me. ‘If I were you and you were me, what would be the one question I should have asked you that I didn’t ask you,’” said Weaver. After a momentary pause, Weaver responded, “Governor, with due respect, I’d be wondering why the heck this guy wants me to come from Pennsylvania all the way to the State of Washington.”



Governor Inslee answered his question in such a clear, articulate manner that explained his rationale and welcoming overture that Weaver was dumbfounded. “I was shocked and amazed. The governor hammered it,” Weaver said. “Wow! This is somebody I definitely can work for, and work with.” And thus, our friend Jim Weaver considered himself very happy to embark to the Pacific Northwest.

Weaver was fortunate to be appointed a cabinet secretary and CIO in Washington and again at his next stop in North Carolina, a distinction that only a dozen or so other state CIOs maintain. That is a distinction which Weaver and his other cabinet secretary state CIOs attribute to their success. We’ll explore this issue and the claim that a strong CIO governance model with cabinet-level status for the state CIO is the sine qua non for a successful state CIO in a future article. However, Weaver’s experience with this model is quite revealing.

“A year ago, we actually debated this among some of us CIOs at NASCIO. As you know, some of the state CIOs do carry the secretary title as well as the CIO, while most just carry the state CIO one. Somebody made the comment that we should only be known as the state CIO rather than a secretary, but several of us protested. I think here in North Carolina, being the secretary of the Department of Information Technology has more meaning and allows me to get things done.”

“Without that cabinet status that all those program leaders have, you’re starting off three yards behind everybody else,” Weaver said.

The same is true for dealing with the legislature. Being an agency secretary when testifying before the general assembly, there’s a huge difference from having just an agency director.

“For example, I don’t want to call it a level of respect, but there’s a level of your engagement that differs a little bit. If I was just a state agency director versus the agency secretary, that engagement is not the same,” Weaver said.

As another example, very few state CIOs deal with broadband anymore, having been stripped away by the governor or the legislature for a number of reasons, primary political.

“Governor Cooper made it very clear to me the importance of broadband. When he and I first talked, we spent a lot of time talking about broadband,” Weaver said.

“I got to ask him some questions and provide my viewpoint. And little did I know that based on that discussion about two months later broadband was getting consolidated under my agency.”

Looking ahead, while Weaver lamented the biennial budget discussions perhaps lingering until the end of 2023, he did offer some interesting tidbits. “As to the state IT budget, taking broadband funds out of the picture. We’re normally around \$600 million to \$650 million. Throw broadband in there and now I add another \$2.5 billion.”

We closed out our N.C. discussion turning to the timely state IT employee workforce issue, of huge interest to all state CIOs. Weaver oversees the Carolina Cyber Network, which consists of eighteen schools, universities, and community colleges, all working collaboratively on curriculum and working to establish a pipeline for talent.

“This pipeline of talent isn’t necessarily coming out and graduating with a four-year cyber degree. However, there are programs out there that you can get certifications in just eighteen months,” he said. “That’s exactly the workforce I want to tap into immediately. They’re coming out with relevant certifications, and we can get them employed right away.”

View the article here:

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