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Commentary: Business sensibility needed for federal IT reform effort

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By Ira Sachs, Published: June 19

Vivek Kundra was the man behind the federal government's aggressive plan to replace its antiquated information technology motor, prone to burning inordinate amounts of fuel and frequent breakdowns, with a state-of-the-art engine capable of making the functions of the myriad agencies run more smoothly and less costly.

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Kundra, the federal chief information officer, was tasked with reversing a long-standing problem: The government's IT programs have been plagued with budget overruns, scheduling delays and other failures despite the public investment of more than \$600 billion in attempts to fix the problems during the 2000s.

But now Kundra plans to leave during the summer, and it may not be enough for his successor to merely continue his focus on boosting efficiency through switching certain functions to the cloud and closing some 800 data centers over the next five years [Capital Business, April 25]. The government needs to adopt a business-style "performance-driven management" system. This approach seeks to develop strategies defining the end business result for each of its IT investments. Then it monitors the agencies' progress carefully to ensure they are on track to meet their goals, providing

an early warning and making adjustments when they begin to veer off course.

As it stands now, the federal government in many cases discovers a problem and takes action in its IT implementation program far too late. For example, a June 2010 federal review of the National Archives and Records Administration's Electronic Records Archives project resulted in six corrective actions, including halting fiscal 2012 development funding pending the completion of a strategic plan. Last January, the Government Accountability Office estimated that the program would likely overrun costs by up to \$405

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million if the agency completed the program as originally designed. While halting 2012 funding is laudable, this project, like many others, was already in trouble before the review commenced.

Of course, the private sector doesn't have the government's challenges of dealing with appropriation issues and multiple layers of bureaucracy. Still, the private sector can offer Kundra's replacement several lessons:

- The IT reform programs need strong executives in place to oversee the process. They need to be backed by people adept at investment analysis, cost estimating and advanced analysis techniques. They need to reward their team members for meeting the business outcomes, not for tactical issues like getting a project document done by Sept. 30.
- Executives need to include all stakeholders — agency business people, procurement people and the IT people — in the planning process. Often the IT people are brought in after the fact, only to determine that the goals cannot logistically be accomplished.
- The stakeholders need to revisit the program goals regularly and check whether the parameters have changed. They need to determine whether to stay on course, make adjustments or pull the plug.

Neither a commercial business nor the federal government can afford to spend money on IT that doesn't deliver results. Having worked with large IT programs and their architects, including the Office of Management and Budget's Federal Enterprise Architecture, it's clear to me that the complexity of requirements, system design and testing often obscures the very goals and business value a program is supposed to deliver.

The government needs an approach to mitigate project risk, potentially avoid catastrophic project failures and, most of all, deliver business value to the organization or agency more reliably.

Ira Sachs is senior technical director at High Performance Technologies Inc. in Reston and author of the book "Performance Driven IT Management."

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