

State Technology Becomes Personal

By Wayne Hall



At a NASTD meeting of state telecommunications and technology professionals earlier this year, one of the hot topics was

why some of their customers, other state agencies and employees, bought services elsewhere.

It is those customers, not appropriated funds, who provide much of the operating capital for state government networks. In practice, the central information technology agency often provides low-cost service by aggregating demand from many agencies to deliver products and services at a lower cost than might otherwise be possible.

The trend 20 years ago was a struggle for control of employee desktops with the development of personal computers. Some policy-makers and technologists argued that mainframe computers, those goliaths housed in temperature-controlled rooms, could offer the same utility as the emerging desktop machines.

However, employees ultimately decided that the mainframe, with its more difficult technology, was not as useful as personal computers. They preferred the independence and value offered by PCs, which started to appear on desktops everywhere. State government gained a partner in the same productivity revolution that has powered the economy for the past two decades.

Phone Sweet Phone

Today, mobility technologies are again transforming the workplace. Employees can communicate wirelessly from the road or kitchen table using any number of methods unavailable even five years ago. And employees are as attached to their personal technology devices as they were to PCs 20 years ago.

One of the defining characteristics of today's technology is the degree to which people tailor it to fit their personality. Anyone annoyed—or amused—by a colleague's wireless phone ring tones can verify that. When force-fed through tinny speakers, some musical ring tones can scream like a bad Father's Day tie.

The fact is some employees opt to use their personal phones to conduct state business. This allows employees to avoid guidelines that prohibit personal calls, or demand burdensome

activity logs to separate personal from public communication. Employees do not want to surrender the value of personal technologies during the one-third of their lives spent at work. It was of course much simpler when a phone was wired to the wall, had one ring tone and did not track your friends and colleagues. Ma Bell did not do ring tones—or mobile data networks, for that matter.

Personal Choice

If state government wants to attract the best and the brightest it will need to accommodate employees by offering physical freedom. The good news is that personal technologies can make more productivity possible. So what will these employees need from state technology professionals?

They need security above all. Left unprotected, customers whose network is mission critical—meaning it can't be unavailable for any reason—may find themselves on the outside looking in if the products and services they've obtained suddenly breakdown.

State technologists thus find themselves managing a transition, harmonizing many different technologies into a cohesive whole, connecting people and things to each other. In such a diverse network, personal choice will occasionally conflict with the security of the government enterprise. Someone has to safeguard important communications, to ensure a malicious code does not take

down a network, or to protect the privacy interests of citizens and public employees. The security role for technologists is likely to grow even more important.

In the middle of this transition, NASTD members can now discuss a collegial tension between security professionals, whose job is to secure as much network communications as possible, and network managers, who will resist measures that may slow or place limits on network speed. It is a healthy discussion.

However, in the end, customers who choose outside providers will need to supply the proper electronic credentials to work securely with other state government employees, whether from the cubicle or corner coffee house. Not everyone will use the state-sanctioned, least-cost, best-and-final solution. The bright new hire just might insist on using that sleek model sheathed in neon pink and download ring tones that belt out James Brown. Thank goodness.

—Wayne Hall is a technology analyst with NASTD, a CSG affiliate.

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