



**Techies: The Unsung Heroes**  
**Why Government IT practitioners should be excited & proud...**  
**and the very real responsibilities they must face**

A GTRA Research Brief

*by Parham Eftekhari*  
*Co-Founder & Director of Research, GTRA*

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## Introduction

GTRA believes that the critical role IT plays in the overall machine we call the Government is often overlooked and undervalued, making it hard for practitioners to not only do their job but truly get excited about what they do. At the same time, this lack of 'limelight' also adversely affects the discussion on the responsibilities and duties facing IT practitioners as servants of the taxpayer. In this research brief, GTRA shares its view on why Government IT practitioners deserve more focus, presents facts it believes show that times are changing with regard to how IT is viewed in the government, and lists the responsibilities it feels members of the community must always remember while performing their day-to-day activities.

- Parham Eftekhari

*"A hero is an ordinary individual who finds the strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles."*

Christopher Reeve

## The geek with the pocket protector saved my life?

When someone asks the question "who serves and protects this nation," the immediate roles that come to mind are members of the armed forces, law enforcement, and firefighters. To be absolutely clear, putting one's life on the line is the ultimate form of patriotism and statesmanship and the men and women who do so on a daily basis deserve every bit of praise, reward, and recognition that they receive...and a whole lot more! There is however other types of government roles who may not face injury or death on a daily basis, but whose contributions to this nation are equally critical in delivering and ensuring the basic services, amenities and safeguards most of us take for granted- most notably the government IT community.

Biased as I may be, there is no arguing that in the past eight to 10 years IT has come to directly influence almost every aspect of our lives; and experts agree that we have only begun to scratch the surface of how technological innovations will completely transform how we communicate, learn, create and share knowledge, socialize and run our day-to-day lives.

The government too has felt this digital revolution. First we saw applications like e-mail, and others which began to streamline processes like finance and HR. Then we saw OMB develop an Office of E-Government & Information Technology, which paved the way for the development of the first Federal Enterprise Architecture (FEA). FEA ushered in an era of consolidation, a focus on different lines-of-business, and new concepts like CPIC and Segment Architectures. With all the new digital data, people began to talk about information sharing, eventually leading to initiatives like NIEM and PM-ISE. **Concurrent to all this activity, security and privacy concerns**

and institutions focused on curbing this alarming trend!

The result of all the initiatives, programs, systems and networks (as complicated and imperfect as they all may be) is a government which:

- Can respond more quickly and effectively to threats to our security and natural disasters
- Is able to communicate and listen to a larger base of its constituency
- Shares information internally and with friendly nations to support a host of critical issues such as terrorism, national defense, medical and scientific innovation, natural disasters, and support for our veterans
- Increase the speed and quality of service provided to citizens by critical government institutions such as the US Postal Service, IRS, Census, Social Security and the Department of Transportation

It is because of the talent, innovations and dedication of countless IT practitioners and visionaries that all of this has been achieved. Unfortunately, our media tends to focus on the negative and not the positive- but let's not forget that for every Katrina-type failure there is thousands of success stories made possible because of IT.

The government IT world is not glamorous or high-profile by today's standards, but the role it plays in delivering services to citizens, other agencies, and **those who protect us it mission critical**. IT leaders, unsung heroes (that they may be), should always remember this and feel the same honor, pride and sense of responsibility that go along with being in such an important role.

### **2009- the Year Government IT Got Noticed**

The good news is over the past year, GTRA has seen many 'firsts' and other happenings which indicate that IT is finally getting the respect and limelight it deserves, in large part due to a young, new technologically savvy administration. Some examples:

- **First Federal CIO & CTO** – In one of the most high-profile changes to the federal IT world, the creation of the federal CIO and CTO roles (held by Vivek Kundra and Aneesh Choopra respectively) created the first truly attention-grabbing platform for visionary government-wide plans to be discussed and widely publicized.
- **IT Infrastructure Named a Strategic National Asset**- Obama's declaration gave endorsement of the strategic importance of IT from the nation's highest voice.

*"I have directed [the federal CIO] to work to ensure that we are using the spirit of American innovation and the power of technology to improve performance and lower the cost of government operations."*

President Barack Obama, in announcing the creation of the role of the first federal CIO

began to grow as high profile data losses & thefts came to light, creating a myriad of initiatives

administration's use of technology to meet many of its strategic goals, including the Open Government Directive and various Transparency initiatives has further illustrated the importance IT will play in this administration, setting a precedent for all that follow.

- **Flurry of Cyber Security Initiatives-** The sheer number of initiatives, unprecedented Civilian/Defense/Intelligence collaboration, and industry/academic/government partnerships on this topic show that all sides are putting resources towards the biggest threat that could prevent IT's impact from reaching its full potential.
- **Web 2.0 & Social Networking in the Government-** With agencies allowing the use of social networking and some even building their own platforms, we now see acceptance of what was only a few years ago considered a negative disruptive technology in the government.
- **Cloud Computing & Apps.gov-** The speed at which the government is embracing Cloud Computing does not support the stereotype of a slow-moving and even slower-to-change government culture.... that's because it's not as slow-to-change anymore!

### Duty Calls

Being a hero in the limelight should be an exciting prospect for any IT practitioner, but this discussion would not be balanced if we didn't also address the very real responsibilities anyone tasked to spend, allocate, or use taxpayer dollars must remember while performing their day to day duties. GTRA fully believes that every government employee is obligated to uphold some basic responsibilities as part of their chosen career path of service to their country:

1. **Do not let frustration get in your way:** The challenges facing any IT practitioner are many... now add on those which are unique to government-life including *actual* politics, scarce resources and a thousand-and-one mandates. It's tough, but you do not have the luxury of throwing your hands in the air and giving up. Be motivated by the fact that services people depend on, taxpayer dollars, and in some extreme cases people's lives are directly impacted by the work you do! Your work isn't to increase shareholder value or help the bottom line- it truly can change the country!
2. **Increase communication with the business side of your department/agency-** Although it's easier to stay in our comfort zone, we know that increased communication with business users drives better results for IT investments. This is a critical challenge the IT community must overcome to truly deliver value.

*"And so, my fellow Americans... ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country."*

President John F. Kennedy

- **Highly-publicized White House initiatives built around the use of technology-**  
The

years, we will see the CXO community become a blend of 30-somethings and 50-somethings, a mix which the IT community has never dealt with. Both the experienced and the new must put aside stereotypes and be willing to learn from each other, communicate (and in some cases change communication styles/behaviors) to ensure dialogue, and be willing to collaborate with for progress to be made.

4. **Get Involved-** We're all guilty at one time or another of complaining about something but doing nothing to be an agent for change. Be it in our office, agency, or an industry association- get involved to help promote the subject areas you feel most passionate about and where you feel you can make a difference! There are too few doing all the volunteer work in the federal IT community and everyone will benefit from increased resources and most importantly ideas!
5. **Keep Learning-** Accreditations and advanced technical degrees will ensure you keep up to date on cutting edge trends and continue to add value to your group. Other less intense ways to self-educate include attending events and meetings, browsing web articles, and reading books. GTRA also heavily supports management & leadership training for all IT practitioners to ensure that your office has a healthy and motivational culture.

3. **Reach Across the Generation Gap-** In the next several