'**Getting stuff done**': A conversation with America's first CIO

During his last few weeks in office, Vivek Kundra, the first-ever federal chief information officer of the United States, reflects on his tenure.

Nancy Killefer
and Kreg Nichols

When President Obama appointed a federal chief information officer (CIO) in March 2009, he said that the nation's CIO would be responsible for ensuring "that we are using the spirit of American innovation and the power of technology to improve performance and lower the cost of government operations." The CIO would also "play a key role in making sure our government is running in the most secure, open, and efficient way possible." The individual he chose to occupy that role was Vivek Kundra, who at the time was the 34-year-old chief technology officer for the city of Washington, DC.

Kundra, who came to the United States in 1985 after having spent most of his childhood in Tanzania, has experience in state government—

he had served as Virginia's assistant secretary of commerce and technology—as well as in the private sector. He had also been a technology adviser on President Obama's transition team. As federal CIO, among his first initiatives were Data.gov, a Web site that gives the public access to government-held data sets, and the IT Dashboard, an online tool that tracks the performance of federal IT programs. More recently, he published a 25-point plan for reforming federal IT management and a cloud-computing strategy for the US government.

In June, Kundra announced that he would be leaving his post for a joint fellowship at Harvard University, where he will be splitting his time between the Joan Shorenstein Center

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on the Press, Politics and Public Policy and the Berkman Center for Internet & Society. In July, with just a few weeks left in his tenure as CIO, Kundra spoke with McKinsey's Nancy Killefer and Kreg Nichols in Washington, DC.

McKinsey on Government: *You stepped into a big new role with no prior experience in federal government. What were your thoughts and expectations coming into the job?*

Vivek Kundra: During the transition, everything was very exciting. I was fueled with all these ideas and dreams about remaking the federal government. And I remember walking into the office on my first day, seeing the technology in the White House, and feeling like I had gone back a decade in time. I thought, "This is the most powerful city in the most powerful country on the planet, and this is the technology we have access to?"

Looking back, what I think helped me the most was the fact that I was naïve—I didn't know how things were "supposed to work." Very shortly after I started, at my first Senate hearing, I was asked, "What are you going to do differently from previous administrations in managing the $80 billion IT budget?" I said I'd launch an IT dashboard—I'd put cost and schedule informa-tion about every major federal IT project online—and I would do it in 60 days. Everyone told me, "You're crazy! Nothing in the federal government gets done in 60 days. You're so naïve."

But I figured an IT dashboard was straight-forward: we could get the smartest developers, leverage a vehicle at the General Services Administration, and just get it done. I blocked out from 7:00 p.m. to midnight every day for 60 days. Everybody was shocked that I would show up and bring dinner, and I would sit in

a room with the developers and a whiteboard, and we'd work on it. During the day I met with people and got feedback—chief executive officers of major companies that had contracts with the federal government, members of Congress, open-government groups like the Sunlight Foundation—and at night I would do the development. And we launched the IT Dashboard in 60 days.

So I decided to continue being naïve, to push the envelope and focus on execution. I realized that's how I would make the biggest difference in federal government—not by issuing a policy memo or publishing a framework, but just by getting stuff done.

McKinsey on Government: *So you got a very early win.*

Vivek Kundra: It wasn't just an early win; it was a big win. Soon after the dashboard went live, agencies started killing IT projects themselves. I realized how powerful sheer transparency was. I took a picture of every CIO and put it right next to the projects they were responsible for.

McKinsey on Government: *How did the CIOs react to that?*

Vivek Kundra: Initially they were skeptical and not happy. Their view was, "We don't know if the data on the dashboard are accurate, we haven't really looked at it, we need more time," and so on. But as soon as they saw that the president cared, and that their cabinet secre-taries and deputy secretaries cared, they got on the train. There were some who were resistant and continue to be resistant to this day, but then we started the TechStat accountability sessions,[1] which created enough of a pressure point that everybody had to participate. So I

[1] Launched in January 2010, TechStat accountability sessions are regular reviews of federal IT programs, conducted by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and agency leadership. According to the OMB, the sessions have enabled the government to turn around or terminate at-risk IT programs, leading to $3 billion in savings.

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wouldn't say everybody was madly in love with the launch of this product, because it did create a lot of pain—but if someone is going to give you $80 billion, why wouldn't they hold you accountable? There was a culture of faceless accountability in federal IT, and I wanted to change that.

McKinsey on Government: How did you get President Obama's buy-in?

Vivek Kundra: The president recognized that IT was important. During the transition, he had formed the Technology, Innovation, and Government Reform team. Transitions have historically had teams focused on defense or the economy or health care—but this was the first time there was a team focusing on technology. On his first full day in office, the president issued a memorandum on open government and transparency, which are things he feels very strongly about.

Accountability and transparency served as our platform for highlighting that IT was a problem worthy of solving. Before that, IT was a sleepy little issue; senior people in the government didn't see IT as important. Why does IT have to be better than finance or human resources? Their view was that essentially it should be a race to the bottom. But my view was that we should race to the top. We should build one thing after

another. We were very aggressive early on in making sure that, with each iteration, the IT Dashboard kept improving.

McKinsey on Government: So every day you'd work from early morning until midnight. Looking back, would you have spent your time differently? Would you have slept more? Or do you think you could have used more support?

Vivek Kundra: I've thought about that question a lot. Would it have helped if I had delegated more? But I knew coming into the job that I could make one of two decisions: I could either treat my job as a marathon—over the course of four years, or eight years if I were being presumptuous, spread things out slowly and have a sane life—or I could accept the fact that I would have no life and double down on everything. I chose the latter, because one lesson I'd learned working in government is that the beginning is where you can make the biggest mark. If I started strong and proved value in the first 45 days, I'd have the credibility to sit down with agencies and say, "This is our game plan; let's go execute it."

I also recognized that if I wasn't on the battleground, agencies would say, "Well, he's delegated it to some other person." It's not the same. My

personal presence was important. I spent a lot of time with people at the agencies—the career folks who have been around for a long time and who will carry this change forward. I also spent time with senators and a number of congress-people and their staff, and even with people who have left government—former senators, ex-CIOs, ex–program managers. I wanted to make sure I was getting the best ideas, no matter where they came from.

McKinsey on Government: *What's the best idea you got from someone outside government?*

Vivek Kundra: There were so many. One is in IT procurement. The government procures things in two ways: the traditional procurement process and a grants process. I was looking for a third way, and I'd done some work for Washington, DC, on issuing challenges and prizes as a way to procure new IT. I met with some innovative people, including a group called TopCoder, which gets armies of developers to convene spontaneously and work on software challenges. For too long, we thought you could do that for Web applications but not major projects. I spent a lot of time thinking through this and talking to people, and I realized that it could work for multimillion-dollar projects. I worked with

Congress to get special prize authority, and now every agency in the US government can spend up to $50 million on competitions and prizes. NASA and the Department of Defense have been using apps competitions; the next frontier is major projects. I think it's going to be one of the biggest game changers in government IT procurement.

McKinsey on Government: *IT procurement is one of the main topics in your 25-point plan for reforming federal IT management, which the White House released in December. It's not the first-ever plan for government IT reform. What makes your plan unique?*

Vivek Kundra: I would say three things make it unique. First, it has deadlines. It's not a theoretical framework or a report that sits in one of the countless metal cabinets you find throughout Washington. Second, its development was neither top-down nor bottom-up but a combination of both—we had a co-creation mentality. We brought in CIOs, chief financial officers, chief administrative officers, the White House, external experts. Third and most important, there's a sustained focus. At every CIO Council meeting it's on the agenda. I've got a team, and I took everything else off their plates—all we do is the 25-point plan. We have daily updates, I personally call people

Vivek Kundra
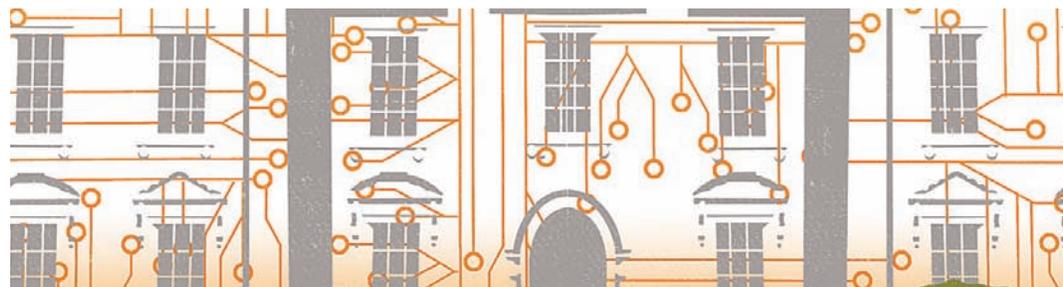
when they miss deadlines, I escalate issues to the chief of staff and the Office of Management and Budget director as necessary. You could have a great 25-point plan, deadlines, and co-creation, but if people aren't relentlessly focusing on it, things won't happen.

McKinsey on Government: *In Washington, with the 24-hour news cycle, sustained focus seems extremely difficult to achieve. How have you kept your focus?*

Vivek Kundra: I've been ruthless when it comes to my calendar. From day one, I decided to focus on only four big things. The first is effectively managing the $80 billion budget, and in that category I would put the work that we've done on the IT Dashboard, the TechStat sessions, and the 25-point plan. The second is the efficiency and the effectiveness of federal IT, and on that front I went after data-center consolidation and the $20 billion shift to cloud computing. The third is cybersecurity. The only reason we were able to send model legislation to Congress—on everything from rationalizing privacy laws in 50 states on personally identifiable information to making sure that we have a four-star general focused on command-and-control infrastructure—was because we really went heads down on cybersecurity. The fourth is open, transparent, and participatory government. In that category are the launch of Data.gov and getting the legislation on challenges and prizes. So those are the four things, and I didn't take any meeting that didn't tie to one of the four. It's tempting—in the White House you can be like a kid in a candy

store, people are always wanting you to fly out to some event and it all sounds fun—but I didn't want to be just flying all over the country giving speeches. I really wanted to get stuff done.

McKinsey on Government: *It's interesting that one of your priorities is cybersecurity and another is openness. Is there any tension between those two?*

Vivek Kundra: I think the tension between security and openness is overdramatized. The tension is really between privacy and openness. Take Medicare/Medicaid transactions. One of the things I pushed hard on was making government data accessible: for example, making transparent how much a knee replacement would cost in Washington versus Houston versus New York. Everyone's default position was, "We're not going to release any data." But the real question was at what level should you not release data? You could issue data at the state level but not at the Zip Code level because if you're in a rural part of a state, there might be only one person in a Zip Code that has that particular health condition. So these kinds of privacy problems require a lot of thought.

But on the security front, my experience has been that CIOs in agencies are themselves the number-one reason for cybersecurity incidents. They're the biggest villains because their default stance is to ban everything. And what do most users do? They use the banned tools anyway. There's shadow IT everywhere and therefore less security.

In the 1960s, the greatest innovation in IT was happening in government. In the 1980s, it was in corporate enterprise. Today all the action is in the consumer space, and because most CIOs are not willing to accept that, they are making IT less secure. Let me give you an example: I don't believe individuals should have to carry multiple devices, and I don't believe the federal government should be in the business of negotiating major contracts with telecommunications providers. When I say that, everybody is up in arms—"Vivek doesn't understand security!" But today when I travel, I don't fly United States of America Airlines and I don't rent a car from the United States of America Car Fleet. I book a flight, I rent a car, and the government reimburses me. In the same way, why aren't we letting people bring their own mobile devices or laptops and building all the security we need in the cloud? We would save billions of dollars if we did something that simple. Right now we spend all this money managing contracts, putting out bids, and provisioning and deprovisioning.

McKinsey on Government: You clearly have many ideas about federal IT, but you're leaving your job. Do you think you can be a force for good from the outside?

Vivek Kundra: I intend to be. I'm passionate about public service, and I care about these issues. Federal IT is not immune to the laws of physics, and the most fundamental law of physics is entropy—everything moves toward disorder unless you are constantly investing energy in maintaining order. How do we fight entropy? To me, the answer has to do with the way the government works with people outside government, because government cannot do everything itself. Today, however, the US government does a horrible job of engaging outside experts. This is going to be a long-term challenge: how do we make sure that in 20 years we're engaging the private sector, nongovernmental organizations, the universities, state and local governments, and even other countries that are doing amazing things?

McKinsey on Government: Of all those external communities, which do you think is the most underleveraged or undervalued today?

Vivek Kundra: I would say the private sector—particularly start-ups. There are small companies out there that may not have the funding to sit down with top government officials, but they're creating the future. How do you give them a point of entry? As part of the IT reform effort, I purposely spent a lot of time in Silicon Valley; I met with a lot of companies from Houston, Austin, and the technology corridors of Boston and New York City; and we've brought in start-ups to pitch to the Federal CIO Council. It's been amazing. CIOs' eyes open up, and they say things like, "I didn't know this technology existed—this is exactly the problem I'm trying to solve!" Suddenly they're fundamentally rethinking how they run their IT departments. They're realizing they don't have to spend hundreds of millions—they can have access to the latest thinking and cutting-edge technology for a fraction of the cost.

McKinsey on Government: *You're well aware that talent is a big issue in government. How optimistic are you that if you bring in these new ideas from the outside, there will be people on the inside who will be open to and capable of understanding and implementing them?*

Vivek Kundra: The great news is that we now have the government's first-ever technology fellows program. We're partnering with leading universities, and it's structural, so these are not just one-off fellowships. Right now we've got fellows working on IT projects at the National Archives and Records Administration and at the Patent and Trademark Office. It's going to be even more exciting going forward, because the federal government is attacking the most transformative set of issues—counterterrorism, intelligence, cybersecurity—and fellows will have the opportunity to work on these issues.

McKinsey on Government: *The US government is about to make what could be severe budget cuts. Do you think these cuts will speed change or stop change?*

Vivek Kundra: If budgets are cut significantly, of course there's going to be an impact on IT departments' ability to get things done, at least in the short term. But I believe it's also an opportunity for the secretaries and deputy secretaries to double down on technology so that they can do more with less. And it will be interesting to see how the private sector responds: the smartest companies are going to look at this opportunity and say, "How do we create value on day one?" Imagine a world with zero-dollar contracts, where vendors get paid for actually delivering something rather than for the promise of delivering something. That could potentially be one of the biggest transformations in government contracting and technology acquisition.

McKinsey on Government: *Thank you, Vivek. You've been very generous with your time, so just one more question: any final reflections on your tenure as US CIO?*

Vivek Kundra: When I look back at the last two-and-a-half years, I can't help but think about coming to the United States for the first time— it was 1985 and I was 11 years old, and I couldn't speak a word of English. I remember I went up to these four kids who looked like my friends back in Tanzania, and I started speaking to them in Swahili, and they looked at me like, "Who is this guy?" So I started speaking louder in Swahili, and the next thing you know they're beating me up because they thought I was making fun of them. I learned English by watching the TV show *Three's Company.*

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I look back at that time and then I fast-forward to my life now, and I feel I've been very fortunate. I've served at every level of government—from Arlington County to the state of Virginia to the city of Washington, DC, and now the United States of America. I've been able to give a little bit back to this country that gave me so much. When I look at this job specifically, I'm humbled that I had the opportunity to work for an amazing president, a president who *gets* technology—it made my job a lot easier. The president actually deeply believes in this; it's not a minor issue for him. I have nothing but great stories from this experience. As I move on, my biggest fear is that I'll never have another job as exciting as this one.○

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