AFFIRM IT roundtable: Mission agility

The Association for Federal Information Resources Management and GCN hosted a roundtable by government program, IT and oversight managers in support of AFFIRM's annual hot topics white paper.

Discussion around this year's theme—Achieving Mission Agility through Information Technology—took place May 14 at the City Club in Washington. It was moderated by Thomas R. Temin, GCN's executive editor.

Participants were:

- Skip Bailey, assistant director, information resources division at the FBI
- Ira Hobbs, deputy CIO of the Agriculture Department
- Army Col. Dan Magee, program manager for Tricare
- Debra Sonderman, procurement executive at the Interior Department
- Janet Barnes, CIO of the Office of Personnel Management
- Kurt Dodd, staff member, House Appropriations Committee
- Dan Chenok, branch chief, Office of Management and Budget
- Kim Nelson, assistant administrator, office of environmental information at the Environmental Protection Agency
- Terry Ouverson, director, systems planning and integration on EPA's office of the chief financial officer
- Bob Kowalski, federal sales executive at Oracle Corp.

Following is an edited transcript of the discussion:

TEMIN: I'm going to start with Kurt. Just go around the table and tell us in two sentences your name, title and what you really do.

DODD: My name is Kurt Dodd. I'm with the House Appropriations Committee, and I look after a number of accounts including the Department of Treasury and the General Services Administration.

HOBBS: Ira Hobbs, deputy CIO, Department of Agriculture, very much involved in the oversight and movement of the information technology and information management programs of USDA.

MAGEE: I'm Col. Dan Magee. I work in the Tricare Management Activity in the Department of Defense. I'm actually the program manager for the Defense Medical Logistics Standard Support Program. And we're the folks who facilitate the business process re-engineering in that field of medical logistics and developing information systems that we put in our military hospitals.

SONDERMAN: I'm Debra Sonderman, director of the Office of Acquisition and Property Management and Senior Procurement Executive for the Department of the Interior.

OUVERSON: Terry Ouverson at the Environmental Protection Agency. I'm the director of systems planning and integration for the Office of the Chief Financial Officer. And I work on designing and implementing financial systems.

BAILEY: I'm Skip Bailey. I'm the assistant director of information technology, and I'm responsible for the Information Resources Division within the FBI. That's essentially the largest IT division. Generally, we're responsible for operations and network legacy systems, maintenance and development.

NELSON: I'm Kimberly Nelson, and I'm the assistant administrator for the Office of Environmental Information at the Environmental Protection Agency. I also serve as the chief information officer there. I've been there about 18 months, relatively new to Washington.

CHENOK: Hello. I'm Dan Chenok. I'm the branch chief for information policy and technology in the Office of E-government and Information Technology and the Office of Information Regulatory Affairs. And I'm happy to be here.

KOWALSKI: Good morning. I'm Bob Kowalski. I'm with Oracle Corp., group vice president with responsibility for civilian agency sales.

BARNES: I'm Janet Barnes. I'm the CIO at the Office of Personnel Management.

TEMIN: Welcome everyone. You all received the theme and the call-out questions. In planning this, we came up with the word "agility" because it's a word that we're seeing more and more in the business press, and now even referred to as a quality that should be sought or is being sought by government agencies.

And we don't want to spend a lot of time defining "agility" here. I'm hoping people understand what we mean, but just to read it into the record: Policies, laws, requirements of citizens are all in flux. That means agencies must have mission agility; that is, the ability to turn on a dime as programs change.

We're going to explore what all that means. We've purposely populated this roundtable a little bit more ambitiously than we have in years past, in trying to have a collection of program management, CIOs, people in finance, people in technology, and also people in oversight from the Hill and OMB. So you have kind of a microcosm, if you will, of all those players that have to make agility happen.

So why don't we just throw out the first question?

In order to get to agility, to get to any goal, you have to have that goal in mind. You have to know what it looks like. So I'm going to ask the panelists: What does an agile organization look like? And putting it a step down from that, if your own organization were more agile, what would it look like as opposed to how it looks now?

And, you know, I think EPA is a good example, and Kim, since you're coming in from the outside, have a view from the industry side, and the high-low view, maybe you'd like to kick it off.

NELSON: Well, I guess I'll start off by saying I don't think we do have an agile organization from what I've been able to see in just 18 months. It's excruciating to get anything done.

I didn't think things could get much worse than state government in terms of bureaucracy, but it's very difficult to accomplish the kinds of things that, I think, we all want to accomplish in a very short period of time.

One of my greatest fears with coming here actually was: In state government, I knew the rules. I think it was Oliver Wendell Holmes who said, "A young man knows the rules. A wise man knows the exceptions." And my greatest fear about coming here was after 22 years in state government, I knew the rules and I knew the exceptions, and how was I going to come down here and deal with the bureaucracy when I didn't know the rules, and I sure didn't know the exceptions?

So what I've tried to do, since I really don't know the rules, is to find the people who do know the rules, but more importantly find the people who know the exceptions to the rules that allow us to do the kinds of things we want to be able to do as quickly as possible to get things done. It’s not easy. It's pulling a team together.

One of the most important things you have to do is look for the right people. The one other thing I will say: To me, getting the agility we need to get things done involves building a team outside of my office, the Office of Environmental Information, and partnering with people like Terry in the OCFO's office and our programs and our regions. Because to me, it's all about partnerships.

If you want to get things done quickly, then you have to have partners in the right organizations.

That’s what we've tried to do, which had never been done in my organization really before, because even before I came in, the organization was only about a year-and-a-half old. So the history of partnership and trust that builds up over a period of time didn't exist. So that's what I'm working on.

TEMIN: I picked on EPA a little bit because to a greater extent than perhaps in other agencies, the things that EPA is supposed to do change because of political change. I'm not going to pass any judgment on who's right or wrong, but clearly when you go from a Democratic to a Republican administration, the agenda changes in the area of the environment.

NELSON: You know, not as much as some people might think. I asked a question before I ever came to EPA, before I even thought I would ever come to EPA, because I did a lot of work with it on the state side. I asked some folks that I worked with who were career folks, who had worked there, some since the beginning of the agency, is there really a difference between a Democratic and a Republican running EPA? I spent 14 years in a state environmental protection agency, 22 years as a political appointee in state government, working for Democrats and Republicans. And I really didn't see a difference in my state organization.

When Tom Ridge was governor, he was a very, very pro-environmental governor, and there was really no difference compared to the Democrat before that.

And I asked the staff that, and they said they had really never seen that much of a difference.

But the staff in the organization really saw, you know, the direction of the agency being relatively constant in terms of its mission.

TEMIN: Well, who wants to jump in here with what an agile organization looks like?

DODD: I would like to jump in and just build upon what Kim just mentioned. The agency doesn't seem to have changed its focus with administrations. The mission didn't change.

I'm concerned about the use of the term "mission agility." I am very comfortable with the concept of agility and that organizations must have agility. But when you talk about the mission, I am a little less comfortable.

Certain aspects of that might be seen as being mission opportunism, or mission creep. And to that extent, I'm not sure that I would concur with the mission agility aspect. But I'm very comfortable with a need for agility within an organization, within the agency, and the need to be able to respond to emerging technologies and incorporate whatever is important to get your job done better.

TEMIN: We'll note that, and anyone can talk to that point.

BAILEY: I would concur with what's been said, but I think when you think about an agile organization, there are really two components. One is a mind-set within the organization. And the other is the ability to deliver. And I think it really requires both of those.

And I have limited experience in federal government also. I'm coming in from outside in the industry, and I'd say that both of those areas need vast improvement within the federal government, clearly within the FBI.

The mind-set of being able to change quickly and adapt and do things new is very important, as well as the ability, once the direction has been stated, to deliver quickly on that stated direction. And I think the way you can achieve that in part is—it's a tired old term—through empowerment, by pushing the decision-making process down in the organization, which is again counter-cultural, I think, in this town.

Because of the accountability and responsibility oversight that's so prevalent, there is a reticence to push decision-making responsibility down in the organization. As a result, there's always huge bottlenecks at decision making, which makes it impossible to be agile.

HOBBS: I'm going to go in pretty much the same direction as Skip does. I'm not sure I know what an agile organization looks like. My sense is that it is about the feel and how that organization acts. And whereas I agree in part that there's still things that we need to do in the government, you know, I think that there are examples, though, and windows that demonstrate whether, where and how the government has been agile.

My sense is in the Department of Agriculture, we're at our very best in an emergency. And you need only go back and look at 9-11. You need only go back and look at major forest fire outbreaks. You only need go back and look at food safety issues in this country. And what you see is an organization like the Department of Agriculture and others that transforms itself from what appears to be a bureaucracy that's holding everything very tight, to an organization that moves very quickly to deal with a very specific problem in a very, very efficient way. And that is the agility of the organization.

A lot of times, our greatest strengths don't come during peacetime situations. And you can characterize that with the Department of Defense. I mean you look at how efficient the military operation is in a warlike situation. So agility, I believe, is also predicated on the circumstances.

And so what I see as those characteristics are a very focused organization that has a very clear mind-set on a very, very clear mission, with a very, very clear window as to what has to be done and when it has to be done.

A lot of times when we're operating day-to-day, the democratic process allows for everyone to be inclusive. And in that sense, sometimes it will take longer than perhaps you would expect from an agile organization. But once a very clear mission or a very clear activity or task is identified, organizations move with, I think, lightning speed to make that happen.

I can think about when 9-11 occurred, and my support colleagues from procurement, property, financial management, information technology, we all got together and said, "Hey, here's what we've got to get done."

That parochialism about my area and my rules went out the door. What became paramount was that we had an issue here that needed to be addressed, and we had to do so in a very quick manner.

Our senior leader came to us and said, "Get it done." Not the usual, "Send me papers," or, "Keep me informed on every step," but "Get this done." And so I think then there are windows in the government where agility is very clear. It is very observable. It is about attitude, look and feel, not so much about the organizational structure.

Paramount and most important, though, is leadership that creates a very clear vision, a very clear situation that must be addressed and that empowers people to make that happen.

TEMIN: I just want to throw in here that Ira said a word that we might even use for help on mission, is "task" or "job" or "deliverable," because the purpose is not to talk about how technology can change what the agencies do. We're not going to make OPM take care of food safety and Agriculture fight wars. So I don't want to get hung up on "mission"—really "task."

HOBBS: Yes. If I could take it a step further, because I remember when they had the floods down in North Carolina, and everybody was dealing with that. Well, the role that the Department of Agriculture played was around food stamps. What happened was we have an elaborate process, safeguards and everything built in about how we get food stamps printed and distributed. Well, with that emergency, we created a special process where we had a special printing done in Texas. We collaborated with the Defense Department and brought in a few of their jets that they loaned us. We used their jets to transfer to North Carolina.

Within 24 hours, what normally would have been a 7- to 30-day process, we were doing in 24 hours. That is where the agility came in, something very clear, very focused. We moved. We made it happen. That's what I see as the agility that exists in the government.

Now, how we bring that to our day-to-day business—I don't know that our day-to-day business allows us to bring that level of agility, because by the very nature of being government, there is a democratic process that involves not just us, but the legislative branch of government. It involves the judicial. So there are a lot of players who have to come to the table.

But once we coalesce around a specific task that has to be done and particularly in emergencies, I think you see the government at its absolute finest, and you can stack it up against any organization in terms of its agility and its will to make it happen.

MAGEE: I would just echo that. I mean, you use the Department of Defense example. When we have a major operation, it's very clear what the mission is. And a number of things that occur during peacetime, which is oversight and prudence, where you're making value trade-offs between a task and mission and whether you're doing it effectively, efficiently, being good stewards of scarce resources. But all of a sudden when you have a very clearly defined mission that's of very high value, you can make value decisions very quickly. The cost of sending that jet became inconsequential because you had a tremendous value that you were trying to achieve.

Now, what I think we get involved in day-to-day is: In complex organizations, there are different people who have different views of what their immediate tasks are. And those all compete. Many times, the key is the leadership, getting everybody pulled in the same direction, so you can clearly focus those individual tasks to an overarching mission.

And how you organize to do that, a step back or a step down at a lower level, I think to be agile at a smaller micro-level, you have to be very connected to your customers. So you have a very clear understanding of what service, what task you're performing. And then that lets you navigate your organization to achieve that.

If you don't have that linkage, you'll get caught up in the throes of our complex organizations.

TEMIN: Janet, there's been a lot of talk in the last year or 18 months about the work force, and so OPM has been in the spotlight in many ways. Tell us about agility there. How could OPM be more—or what would it look like if it were more agile? Or is it agile?

BARNES: I'll tell you, the word "agile" sends up all sorts of red flags for me. I think it's because it seems like a new word or a new way of characterizing, "I want what I want when I want it, and that was yesterday." And it doesn't necessarily imply the discipline that has to go through with that, which means, "What are the trade-offs? What is the priority setting? And how do we know that we're spending these resources on the most important work for us to do?"

I totally agree with Ira and Dan that in an emergency, the government reacts very quickly and effectively. No question. But on a day-to-day basis, to build in agility, you have to ask how much agility and at what cost. And the government is not the same as the private sector in this regard.

In the private sector, there is an equalizer, which is the marketplace. If you build an organization that's totally agile, perhaps totally redundant, that all has to come to play in the bottom line and whether people are willing to pay for the products and services, which incorporates that cost.

In the government, there is no marketplace to set the price. And so in effect we are responsible as trusted agents for responsibly using tax dollars and setting up an appropriate level of agility. And I'm not quite sure how we get there.

But in thinking about the organizational pieces, I think there are several that come to my mind. One is, perhaps, it's a work force structure issue. We have to think about the balance and how we use our work force. What are the appropriate roles for government? And then what are the appropriate roles for vendors and contractors in terms of delivering service?

A model that I'm beginning to focus on in my organization is one where team leaders and supervisors and your more senior level is your institutional knowledge base, and where you really attempt to focus retention and recruitment issues. But we're not necessarily any longer going to be in the service delivery business.

I think we need to be system integrators. I think we need to be able to manage work. And I think we've got to transform underneath to being contractor-driven if we have multiyear, quick reaction task orders in place to be able to move quickly from a statement of a need to bringing in whoever, whatever skills we need to deliver a service. So I think we need multiyear, quick reaction task orders. I think we need to think about how to appropriately use the balance of contractor, staff and in-house resources.

And I also think we need an effective investment control process that's institutionalized in the organization that allows us to think about our priorities and make sure that we're making good trade-offs.

I don't know that the government should be in the business of doing leading-edge research and going after new technologies unless they are absolutely critical to achieving a mission that's newly defined—because it's expensive, it's time consuming, and it doesn't get you your results quickly. We have got to be experts at using what's already been invented. The not-developed-here philosophy has to become a way of doing business in the government, in my view.

We need to look at what exists in the private sector, what exists in the public sector, take advantage of it, and if it meets 90 percent of what we need, go with it, rather than trying to customize individual COTS solutions to meet that last 10 percent. It may not be worth it.

Maybe there is a philosophy in the organization that has to get to "A." "A's" are great, but not if it costs a lot more money. Maybe we need a lot, a plethora, of "B" solutions that reach across the organization and get the job done.

TEMIN: It sounds like you've given it some thought.

BARNES: Oh, I have. It's actually something we face every day. And I don't think that the needs have changed. And I don't know that we have yet achieved the discipline in thinking about, "Do I really need to do it?" and "Do I need to do it tomorrow?"

So what if it's next month or next year? Is that really critical to get done? And I think because resources are tight and because of the expectation of the taxpayers, we have to take those decisions very seriously.

CHENOK: I think that Janet has laid out a terrific set of factors that create for an agile organization, so I would actually agree with your diagnosis, I guess. But I would suggest that those are indeed factors that are necessary for agility within the government.

And I think that we don't need to sacrifice "A" solutions if we have a good process and a repeatable process. I agree totally with where Ira and Dan were coming from with regard to a crisis, and the fact that the government has demonstrated its ability to respond well and quickly.

The question is: How do we, given the rapid pace of technological change, take the best of the characteristics of those situations and apply them to the day-to-day work? I don't see that we necessarily have to, sort of, throw up our hands and say, "The government is in a different place when there's not a crisis."

The government ought to create repeatable processes, which may require more work up front. Then, whether it's a crisis that comes along or a technological solution that's going to make the agency operate more effectively or efficiently, they can much more quickly implement that process and understand where the exceptions are. So if they see that they've got to do something tomorrow to achieve a mission objective for the secretary, they know which pieces of the process they basically can bypass.

And there's an audit trail for what occurred. And they don't have to sort of make it up as they go along and invent new bureaucracies.

I think that the other point here is the part about knowing the customer. As we see more and more Americans using e-government and expecting rapid reaction from government, I think there's going to be a greater demand for us to operate more quickly, even in our day-to-day activities.

So the model, "The government has got a lot of bureaucratic red tape and for the most part we should just accept that," I don't think is valid going forward.

And then the other point Kim brought up is partnerships, creating partnerships that didn't exist before. Again, it may sound contrary, but it may be that an agile organization creates a more complicated organizational chart, only because you're taking people from lots of different organizations to make a decision quickly rather than trying to sort of bring everything up through the bureaucratic step-up. I would call it a more matrixed organization.

I think we've seen in a lot of the successful e-businesses like IBM or Oracle reform in the 1990s, where you've seen billions of dollars in savings.

TEMIN: Good. Which brings us to Bob. You're associated with a company that's pretty quick on its feet and has made a lot of jagged turns when the marketplace has demanded over the years.

KOWALSKI: Right.

TEMIN: So what are your thoughts on agile organizations, and how do you characterize them?

KOWALSKI: My thoughts dovetail on a lot of the comments that I've heard. And, Ira, when you talk about the crisis situation, really you're talking about problem-solving and doing it very quickly.

And Janet's comment about private industry having to react to the marketplace especially in information technology where new players emerge literally overnight, and you thought you had the competition covered, and, "Whoa, who is this company?" And maybe they have some niche functionality that's better than, say, an Oracle or an IBM in a particular area.

You have to be extremely agile to redeploy resources to solve that problem, or you perish. It’s literally a matter of [layoffs] and things of that nature that we'd like to think that we've done a pretty good job of avoiding.

But there is very little time in private industry, and there's very little time when it comes to a crisis. The question that I would kind of throw back is: How do you get that mentality for problem-solving? Because of things that Dan mentioned about citizen service expectations based on what they experience, whether it's shopping at Amazon or maybe a license registration in state and local—that is the expectation.

So how do you morph the organization to have a focus for, one, analyzing where the issues really are for your customer base, the citizenry, and then, having a good performance assessment about how the problems are being solved? And how are you doing that in new and innovative ways? Because the last time I checked, your missions aren't changing; they're expanding. They truly are.

We experience similar things from—this might be a stretch—but as a sales force, we encounter new requirements out of the government, specifically for my group. Let's use the Joint Financial Management Improvement Program as an example. Every three years, your federal financials product has to be recertified.

There are a limited number of months to do that. We have to have a matrixed organization, which I heard brought up, which is key.

And at the same time, you need accountability, but you need the communication across that matrixed organization to make sure that, in this case, the development organization delivers what you need and when you need it. So there's a lot of trust that goes into that. But the bottom line is you have to have that line of communication that cuts across that matrixed resource pool to solve that problem and to solve it in a timely fashion.

SONDERMAN: Can I add some thoughts on that? One of the things that, I think, we're trying to do is rethink what our work force is and think about ourselves, or try to move ourselves towards thinking of us as knowledge workers.

I'm not a procurement analyst, or an IT analyst, or this or that. I'm a person who takes in information. I analyze information. I come up with a recommendation or a solution or a something, and then I either have somebody else carry that out or I carry it out myself.

And it is a somewhat broader focus that enables you to work on different kinds of problems and not get trapped in the box of only thinking about yourself as, you know, "Oh, well, I'm the grants manager, so I can't work on your IT project."

And I also think that when we talk about our ability to respond to emergencies—and we spend a lot of time thinking about this in Interior, because, with Agriculture, we operate the National Interagency Fire Center—we train people how to do that. We train those people how to manage.

One of the things that's been very interesting to me in the homeland security discussions is that they are looking at the Interagency Fire Center as a sort of cadre of managers who know how to take complex problems and solve them quickly, pull a team together, figure out what kinds of resources we need and then act.

Well, we trained all those people to do that, and they applied that particular skill to a fire, or picking up shuttle parts or, you know, a host of odd things that we end up working on.

But those skills in managing in an agile way are things that we train, so one of the things that we're doing within Interior is looking at: How can we share that crisis management or emergency management training to a broader group of managers so that they'll be able to take on problems in a more agile way and deal with it?

TEMIN: Many of the answers we've heard have also answered Question 2: What are the skills and management techniques required?

I just want to very quickly ask: Is there anything we haven't covered in terms of assuming agility done right is good? And Janet mentioned management discipline, and the analysis required before you act in an agile way. We've heard about leadership. Anything else we've missed?

BAILEY: Yes. Maybe it's more of a point of emphasis as opposed to that we missed it, but I think the key ingredient if you have repeatable processes and good management is still the ability to have good judgment. And I think that's the critical skill. You can't build a process and build out the judgment part of it. You can't build the management structure or process and build out the judgment process. So good judgment is going to be necessary to have agility in any organization.

And I think I would certainly agree with what's said about the government's ability and certainly the FBI's ability to respond to crisis. In fact, I'd characterize it as: We do two things really well. We respond to crises really well, and we do things by brute force really well, you know. (Laughter.)

We throw a lot of people at it, you know, and solve a lot of problems.

What we don't do well, I think in general, is to build quick, elegant solutions to the normal kinds of problems and the day-to-day kinds of problems. And that's why, I think, developing leadership within the organization where good judgment is built and established, honored, recognized can help to lead to more agility on a day-to-day basis as you rebuild processes and as you build management and strengths. So I think that's key.

BARNES: I just wanted to add one other thing. In addition to an investment control process, I believe strongly can be an art form [and] that I feel is lost to a great extent, is a structured system methodology for delivering from requirements straight through to delivery, and through the life cycle of the system.

Properly employed, it can help you very quickly define new requirements, deliver them, make expectations clear, and minimize re-do. And so if you're looking at the fastest way to get from "I need something" to a delivery, one of the best measures you can use, is using a process over and over again that helps you get there.

And we're putting a lot of time and effort into making sure that everybody in the agency shares the importance of doing work in that fashion.

And I've had a lot of questions lately in terms of, "Well, can we take this methodology and just apply it to other aspects of our business?" And that is absolutely true. It's really a problem-solving problem, and solution delivery mechanism.

And I believe while some may think that's a stodgy bureaucratic approach, I actually believe it is a core piece to being agile and being able to deliver quickly over and over again.

TEMIN: I think implied in what a lot of folks have said is that if you're really good at that kind of thing, day-to-day, having sound processes, you'd probably be better in an emergency as well.

BARNES: Absolutely.

CHENOK: One other point on the skills—and we've talked about it indirectly—is team building, teamwork and in the sense of having a communication structure as an organizational skill.

A lot of what I would say is agility is people just understanding what's going on and knowing what their roles are and knowing they're part of the team. And that if something comes along that requires people from different organizations, from other teams to react quickly, this could require sort of irregular meetings of staffs from different organizations, just to communicate what's going on, where you get different parts of different divisions together in teams; not necessarily because there is a crisis, but because you want to be able to handle a crisis well.

MAGEE: In my mind, I have to draw a distinction between an agile organization and agile leadership. And this can get kind of flaky, but you want an agile organization, but from my perspective as a program manager, what I need is absolutely persistent leadership.

The most critical factor to us ever delivering a product is our leadership, keeping with the vision, staying the course. What kills us is when they become too agile and they listen to what the latest technology is or what the latest voodoo business guru has come out and, and they pull your requirements all over the place.

So leadership persistence actually allows you to get to market rapidly. The ability to get the requirement, very rapidly achieve that requirement, [avoids] the requirements creep and the environmental change stuff that actually kills your ability to deliver a product. And the key then is leadership persistence. So you don't want agile leaders; you want an agile organization.

TEMIN: Yes. Bob is saying: What is [Oracle Corp. CEO] Larry [Ellison] coming up with this Monday, right?

KOWALSKI: Well, I’d like to comment on that, because I think when Larry gets conviction, he absolutely sticks to it, and it gets managed all the way down to the touch points of the organization.

And, you know, as an example, maybe six or seven years ago when everything was declared to no longer be client-server, thou shalt go to the Web, that was it. The development organization had to scrap everything they had been working on and be agile—turn on a dime.

Incredibly important, this consolidation effort that we went through where 90 different data centers throughout the world were going to go to two, and that was that. And that was not an easy cultural change, but I think the key is leadership that sticks to its guns and to its conviction. You have got to have strong leadership. And for us, it just comes down from the top.

But another thing that I've always admired about our culture is that we do take the time to get down to the touch points to see what the reaction is of the marketplace. Are we still able to deliver service after dramatically cutting costs? If we're not, then what do we do to change that?

So, you know, I'm echoing that. The leadership and then down through the organization into the touch points is very, very important.

TEMIN: Sometimes, certainly as managers, we come up with great ideas and plans and forget to tell the people who have to do them, and then we wonder why it doesn't happen. Final comments on this?

OUVERSON: I'd say addition to persistent leadership, I think a lot of this is really about persistent change control, knowing what change you want, having the mechanisms in place to control the change, to guide the change. And in a way, the [President's] Management Agenda and the executive scorecard are really, in a broad sense, all about change control. What change does the government want? How do we get there? Evaluate it? Are we making progress? If not, how do we adjust?

TEMIN: Including the ability to change the change control, which I think is where government sometimes may stop. Kurt, we'll come back to you on the skill required because when you look across the table at a program manager or an agency leader in that appropriations setting, what skills impress your type?

DODD: Well, at different levels of the organization, we'd hope that there would be different types of skills, and most of us start out with some technical abilities of some form, and you build there, in my mind at least, towards a more vision-oriented ability. And it's part of the growth, part of a career path, part of a natural progression.

So I'm not sure that you can say that this is the ability that anyone needs. It's different abilities at different stages in a career, different parts of an organization.

TEMIN: Let's move onto the vendor side a little bit. We touched on this in Janet's comments and some of the others, but is the vendor base that serves federal agencies supporting this? We can assume there is a quest for this quality we've discussed. Do they support it? And what would you like from vendors to help you get to that ability to have a good change control, good judgment, the ability to turn as requirements change?

BARNES: I just have thoughts on all of this. It's a very interesting topic for me.

When I think about the vendor community and the role they play, there is an attitude or a viewpoint that has to be shared, which is: Can we engage our industry partners, in a sense, in the creative problem-solving, rather than just buying their bodies to do work?

In the model I was suggesting earlier, where you have your institutional knowledge and, in effect, again using your in-house staff as systems integrators, they have to be able to then deal with the people delivering the technology services, the actual hands-on doing of work. You have to be able to partner with them in creative problem-solving, so you're both comfortable with the direction you're going in.

And I think that takes the government being willing to engage in that dialogue. And it takes the vendor side to be able to bring that knowledge and experience to the table.

Two other thoughts. I really want that partnership to also be attuned to looking at what's already been done and bringing that to bear and helping us understand how we can use either pieces or whole solutions to meet what we think is a new requirement, which may, in fact, not be.

And so we have to be very aggressive and assertive in saying, first, that we're going to see what's there. And so they have to bring that mental viewpoint to the table.

And I think the third point is: I want a vendor to work with me who is willing to understand my infrastructure and work within it rather than impose theirs on what we're trying to do, because we're going to be familiar with what we're doing. If you're building a structured environment for doing work, we're going to be most familiar with our environment, our technical standards, our business processes. And I want this willingness and flexibility to work within my environment.

So, in effect, I'm looking for an agile organization on my contractor side.

BAILEY: I think contractors have much more ability to be agile in terms of skill sets than the government agencies do, because they have the ability to go out and find the people and to have maybe a more healthy turnover kind of ratio and so forth. So that partnering idea allows you to leverage their ability to be more agile in terms of skill sets, which I think is key.

OUVERSON: In terms of the software, I guess, as distinct from the contractors, I think a lot of progress has been made in supporting the government. I think the direction of component solutions is a good direction.

We want software that conforms to our new problems as they emerge, conforms to our processes. It requires process change because that is probably the area of greatest risk in bringing up new solutions. So I think continuing to move towards openness, component solutions—I would much rather assemble a set of solutions that someone else has already built than have to develop it myself. It's just quicker and easier and lower risk.

NELSON: I would like to see vendors be a little bit more aggressive in certain situations. For instance, we've talked about the culture of our organizations, and that sometimes we have employees and organizations that aren't as agile.

You know, I've seen too many situations where I think the vendors are just going along with the client. This is what the client is dictating, and the vendor is going along with it. And I think they need to be a little bit more aggressive with the client or be willing to kick things up.

You know, there's a long-term relationship, often, between the client and the vendor, and they don't want to ruffle any feathers. They don't want to disturb the water. I have one particular case where I have a program that's been working on a system, and it's three-and-a-half years between intervals of deliverables. Well, that's not acceptable. And yet, you know, a very well-known, big-name consulting firm has been working on this project for years and just keeps plodding along and keeps working with the program.

I don't know how you do that in today's world, and yet they continue to do that.

SONDERMAN: That's the fault of our process. If you talk to the commercial side of Oracle, as opposed to the government side of Oracle, or any other company that's out there, you get very different kinds of solutions.

The problem is that we have tended to use very rigid specifications, and they all know how to tell us, "Oh, you want me to do this? OK. I'll do this, and here's why I'm so great. Here's why I'm the best company to do it."

One of the things that we're trying to do in the acquisition community, as part of our move toward performance-based acquisition, is to try to get people to think about the objectives that they're trying to accomplish. What's the problem that you're trying to solve? Don't tell industry what solution you want.

Tell them your problem, and ask them to bring you a solution. And it's amazing how much more creative things you can get.

I've just been through a two-week market research process on a project we're doing. And the companies who brought in their government folks to meet with us were all like, "What? You want us to do what? Well, what do you really want? Just, you know, what do you really have in mind?"

You know, the ones who brought in the commercial side of the organization, "Oh, sure, yes. This is your problem? Well, here's how we would go about it. Here's what best practices we've seen when we've done this."

So I think it's out there. But we're our own worst enemy.

And we have to get ourselves out of that habit of, "Oh, we bought this three years ago. Let me get the last contract. You know, change the Y2K clause to whatever it is now," and think about it differently.

OUVERSON: I think in the area of financial systems, I agree with a lot of what you said. But the federal government is still 20 percent of the market, and the COTS packages—I mean, the companies respond to the marketplace. They're not designed with the federal government totally in mind. And it does require some adaptation before they can be used.

So while I would like to be able to sort of bring in a commercial solution, at least in my area, it's not always possible.

TEMIN: Other comments on vendors?

MAGEE: It helps me when a vendor knows their strengths and weaknesses. And I'm sometimes frustrated with the vendors who portray themselves to be all things to all people all the time—and they really aren't.

And our most success has been when we've found a vendor who knows what their strengths are, is willing to partner with other vendors when they realize that there are other strengths, and that everybody wins when you achieve a success.

And that really is if there are long-range leaders in their organization, they understand what may be more important than me getting an extra $100,000 that is actually going to this other guy; that the ability to play on their strengths, effectively partner, really brings the long-range wins to both them and us.

I know there's been a big push to: "OK, you've put as much risk as possible through the contractual process to the vendor, and they'll bring innovative solutions." But I would say many times through no fault of their own, they are not as aware of the environment [in which] they are assuming that risk.

And so they're not prepared to deal with the latest common operating environment rules we've laid down, or the latest information assurance rules we've laid down, because that's not the commercial standard.

And so I find that you really have to have an integrated spiral development process. Throwing your requirements over the transom, putting all the risk on the contractor, did not work well for us.

And it has to be very much a partner-shared-risk endeavor.

TEMIN: And it's fair to say the smart contractors will push back a little bit, if 100 percent of the risk is on them. There's some really big ones now where vendors have taken major baths, and it's affected the whole market valuation of their company.

HOBBS: I think this whole process of government and vendor relationships is a dual-edged sword. On one hand, I think the vendor community supports the notion of our agility. And I think the government has made tremendous strides in getting away from the path which has been the detailed specification and seeking to embrace industry more from a solution standpoint.

And one of the trends of the future will be that this notion of the government side of the house and the commercial side of the house, from the standpoint of doing business—I think you're going to see that merge, because we are going to be looking for, not "the government solution," but we are going to be looking for the best solution. But by the same token, that works well when that vendor perceives itself as your partner.

Now, as we move more toward consolidation, as we look more at really honing our profession in terms of enterprise architecture, that clearly starts to consolidate how we buy, where we go into the marketplace singularly as opposed to a thousand little offices buying from a thousand companies, we will see the conflict and the tension between government and industry increase because the marketplace isn't going to support everyone in the way that it does now.

We're going to see a major change. And so right now a lot of us, particularly in large organizations, you know, we're trying to do something at the top of the organization, and there's a thousand vendors who are, for lack of a better phrase, doing different things all across the country with respect to our organization. And that's where I think this inherent conflict is going to come into play.

As we say, "This is going to be my product line within our organization." There's some folks who are going to be outside of that line. And those folks aren't going to be able to get in. And then you know what will happen. You know, I don't know Kurt that well, but I'll—all of a sudden, I'll start to know Kurt well (laughter) because somebody from the Hill will call and say, "What the hell are you doing down there? This constituency is being impacted. This constituency is being impacted."

All of those then have the wherewithal to impact the agility issue for us, as we start making value choices that kind of flushes out the marketplace and the vendors that are out there. So that's why I say it is a two-edged sword.

I think, you know, you go to the sessions, you look at the partnerships that are being formed. It's clear what they want. On one hand, they want us to be more efficient, they want us to be more agile, because they're taxpayers.

But on the other hand, we start hitting at some very basic issues, such as, which companies will thrive, which companies whose own agility will allow them to thrive, vs. those that will fall by the wayside? That is where we'll start to see the other side of the sword.

CHENOK: I think it comes back to the point that a couple of people have made about how we present the government's requirements, and how we create an acquisition environment that promotes agility. And combining that with what Ira was just talking about, do we promote agility by having a thousand different contracts in hundreds of different agencies for the same sort of small types of things, where the vendors are all running around trying to make their quarterlies? Or do we promote agility by basically reselling us the same thing? Or do we promote agility by being a more stable buyer at an end price level of these things that cut across, and then taking advantage of the best thinking in the vendor community for creating the innovative solutions that we all need to create the agility to achieve the mission? And obviously, you know, from our perspective, it's the latter that we think is the better model.

TEMIN: Any final comment? Kurt, do you want the last word on the vendor side? We seem to be giving you the last word today on these topics.

DODD: And I appreciate that. I think that there have been some very good comments. I think this tension that Ira has noted between the vendor community and risk and the government is a natural one. And I think it will always be with us, and it is an interesting interface that needs to be managed and understood.

KOWALSKI: I'd like to throw some comments back that I heard from Mark Forman at one of his presentations: For every $1 of software, it costs between $5 and $7 to implement a commercial ERP solution in the commercial marketplace. That sounds kind of high, but that's the reality. In the federal government, it's $20 to $1.

So, you know, going around the room and thinking on some of the comments, the comment about software being written and delivered to specifically meet federal requirements, and with COTS solutions, there is going to be some give and take.

I would submit you'll find one that's flexible, that doesn't require customization, to the greatest extent that you can. There's always going to be something, right? There are legacy systems to integrate. There are third-party solutions, etc.

Problem-solving, though, thinking about the business problem that we're trying to solve, yes, we have reports and regulations and so on that we have to adhere to, but are there unique and innovative ways of solving the problem? Are there commercial processes that we could possibly get? Not change for the sake of change but change where it makes sense. Change where it might create some efficiencies, maybe some self-service things that might require some organizational change, some cultural issues, some political issues, but a more agile organization as a result. Taking that into the procurement comment on the thousands of contracts, you know, when you look at the power of aggregating buys and preventing maverick acquisitions, looking at "Who are my Top 10 suppliers, and am I leveraging those contracts? Am I getting the biggest discount I could from that supplier because they are No. 3?"

Those kinds of things are only going to occur when you're channeling through a very formalized process for acquisition and not allowing the thousands of contracts. Now, that's easier said than done, when, again, you've got multiple touch points, right?

I mean, you all do. I threw out more of the problems than the solutions, but those are just some thoughts I had in listening.

MAGEE: And almost all of these issues are balance issues. … The Holy Grail of integration always offers tremendous fruits. You know, you can leverage marketplace and all kinds of things, but integration, again, at the program level perspective, all the requirements—integration takes a tremendous amount of resources and money and bureaucracy to achieve. And it can significantly impact your time to market.

In other words, you're always making a trade-off. Do I deliver a capability quickly, or do I look to integrate and subsume those actual missions to the Holy Grail of integration? So you're trying to find a balance there. And the department, I know, in DOD it kind of goes like this [indicating] when they realize the cost of integration and the inflexibility that was imposed really kept us from being an agile organization.

And then you all of a sudden see an empowerment and a move away from the integration because, loosely coupled, some of those things are good enough and allow us to get to market or achieve mission.

TEMIN: And we'll probably never solve the, you know, government-specific vs. COTS. And let's face it, if somebody sold an ERP to CSX Railroad, and then they sold it to Amtrak, it would probably be very different in implementation, even though it was the same COTS package, as well.

BAILEY: I think, though, that part of the reason for the disparity in cost of implementing the COTS package in the government and the private sector is precisely the willingness to change processes, I mean, and it's kind of a cart-before-the-horse situation.

You normally would say that you want your business needs and processes to drive what software you use and have them use it. But when you, again, make a selection, you almost have to reverse that process and say you better be willing to fine-tune your business processes to match the software, or it's going to cost you, you know, forever in terms of customization and then with new releases. And so the flexibility of the change process is critical to being able to realize these savings from COTS packages and from using integration.

Integration also requires that flexibility in changing processes because when you integrate, everybody has got to do things in a similar way. And that's really critical for us—for anybody to succeed in leveraging the vendors and leveraging the e-government initiatives is that flexibility. And you have to decide where you are unique and you must do things in a very specific way, and those better be very closely tied to your mission of your organization.

If you're really hosed up about how to use a general ledger, then you've got some real problems and you ought to do what is best practice, which are usually built into the ERPs and so forth.

You may have specific areas where it really does matter, because you're unique and that's your mission. But I think there are much fewer of those than there are of the other kind.

TEMIN: From OMB, from Mark Forman specifically, we're hearing three phrases quite often—"business cases," "project management skill," and "enterprise architectures"—as kind of the ingredients that will lead to many things.

Are these helping agility? Also, as was said, sharing resources across the silos that are the agencies, how are these contributing to agility? Are they? Is there any effect yet?

BARNES: Considering my remarks in general today, I believe structure and processes are critical to agility.

And I especially remember Skip's comments about how important judgment is. And I think some of these processes can actually be a hedge against any misjudgments or problems in terms of getting off point.

If you have an enterprise architecture, that is the broader, longer-term view of the mission of the agency and how their entire approach to IT management fits in, then that's going to be your guiding force. And it provides that structure within which work is done.

I also think that it helps to the extent that you really have a good enterprise architecture and take the time to do it. It helps guide your technical standards. It helps set your framework for doing business, so you're minimizing learning curve. You're minimizing differences. And, in effect, you're establishing that structure.

I think the business case is back to another point I raised earlier about the investment process, and the ability to make careful, wise choices in terms of where you're spending your money, especially if you're attempting to say we need agility to deliver these solutions and invest in that infrastructure.

And a third point on information sharing and system sharing: Take advantage of what's already done that you do not need to recreate. You do not need your own payroll systems. You do not need your own travel system. You do not need your own procurement systems necessarily. See what's out there that you can take advantage of so you free up those resources from doing those things to focus on mission-unique, mission-critical needs.

So that is part of establishing a margin in your resource base—to be able to deploy quickly to meet the needs of the agency.

TEMIN: That relates to what Skip said, why do you need—I believe there are 22 processes that go across all agencies. Why does everyone need their own copy of it, or their own version of it, and why do they need—why would you need a unique way to use a general ledger? Kim?

NELSON: To follow up on what Janet said, I would agree with that. I think things like architecture, in particular, support agility, because what it does is allow you to build core components that can be reused many times.

And I think in terms of getting solutions out faster, I saw that from state government experience. We were an environmental agency that had an enterprise architecture long before anyone else did. And while it was difficult getting to the first phase doing all the integration, once we were there, our ability to roll out solutions was tremendous because we had the enterprise architecture in place. And the same goes with project management. I mean, this particular situation I referred to previously with three-and-a-half year deliverables, I think goes back to poor project management. I think I'd need to have better project management for that kind of solution.

I think all of the things we're doing and particularly the e-gov initiatives, again, allow us to jump on solutions that already exist.

Agencies didn't have that. If they had the ability before, they didn't exercise it. So for a rule-making initiative that we have now with 200 other agencies that need rule-making to be able to jump on that quickly and get a solution, it really isn't any different than somebody in the commercial sector saying, "I have a solution to your business need." That's what these e-gov initiatives are doing for federal agencies now, saying, "I can provide you with a solution, and you don't have to build it." That's tremendous. That's tremendous.

The only thing that I think hampers the agility a little bit from some people's perspective is not the business cases, but our budget cycle. You know, if we're sitting here right now working on 2005, that's tough.

Now, I don't know what the budget cycle is for a company like Oracle, when Larry Ellison says, "We're switching from client-server to Web," and how quickly you make that turnaround. But, you know, clearly here in the federal government, we're looking at three years.

That's tough, when you talk about the mission of EPA in the last 18 months, you know, we've seen the agency have to do things we never thought we'd have to do before—clean up the Hart Senate Office Building, deal with the shuttle disaster, deal with the cleanup of the World Trade Center.

All those emergency response activities, while we're able to participate in some federal government emergency response activities, they brought a whole new perspective to EPA in terms of some of the things we have to do, and to look three years out can be a little tough.

TEMIN: Dan, you've been part of the genesis of a lot of these new initiatives, and I think there's some obvious reasons why OMB wants this. But would it be fair to say that something akin to the agility of agencies and quicker rollout as Kim talked about was part of the thinking behind the architectures, the business cases, the sharing of resources? I mean, besides saving money, and deploying better service to the citizens.

CHENOK: Yes, as an organizational imperative, that’s right. The primary goal of doing this is to get the government to operate more effectively as an enterprise in serving the various different citizen groups that we serve. That at its simplest form is what the e-government agenda is all about. It's the government acting together more effectively to serve the people that we serve through or by leveraging technology to do that in a collective manner and creating a better performance.

And so business cases start with a performance question and then ask a collaboration question. Enterprise architecture is all about identifying opportunities for collaboration. And then the resource sharing is all about implementing collaboration, if you will.

HOBBS: I wanted to say I think that, you know, the enterprise architecture, the business case, the project management, you know, I'm right where Janet is on that. But I think the hidden portion that we don't talk about as much in terms of these imperatives is the impact that it's having on our culture in terms of the way we have traditionally done business, as opposed to the way that we do it now, or at least we're trying to do it now.

And I think part of this is if we go back and start thinking about what we've been talking about in terms of agility, we've been talking about communications. We were talking about team performance. We've been talking about working together as a team. And that's a large part of what's happening. Even in those instances where we're not as quick to come forward to work as teams, you know, it's still happening.

So we're being pushed in the direction of not only working as a team, but for a lot of us really teaching us about what team performance is all about, be it resources, in terms of money, dollars or whatever else in that regard. That's critical.

The other part is in one of my favorite “Star Trek” shows where they were out doing a visit to a new world. The leader of that world said, "You know, I went to bed thinking that I was the solo voice in the universe. And I woke up to find that I was simply another voice in the chorus." And for a lot of us, we're waking up to find out that we're simply another voice in the chorus. We're not the only one doing something. We're not so unique as we have always put forth within our organizations.

We're finding out that there are other agencies that are doing the same thing and, yes, some of them are doing it better than we are. And rather than continuing down the path that we are on, or creating new paths, we can simply go and pull it from some place else, and still have a very effective and meaningful process.

So I think that's the hidden value of what we're getting out of this, is this change in the government's culture about how we do our work and who is our co-worker, so to speak. It's no longer the person in the cubicle with you. It could be a person who is on the other side of the country. That's who you are working with to achieve a respectable end. And I think that's the other value that we're getting out of this, that probably years from now, someone will say it was the turning point in the government's culture.

TEMIN: Kurt, any comments on the resource sharing aspect?

DODD: I think it's important. I think, and I certainly hope, that Ira is correct that we will see this as a turning point, and I agree that culture is perhaps a large and understated beneficiary of the efforts that are under way.

With respect to business cases, I think all of the process in terms of review and analysis is good. I'm not certain that there is any one particular mechanism that works in all situations. On particularly the term "business case," I think, as we've already pointed out, there are some differences between the government and business. And it's not easy to translate some of those features.

But I think the process is good. I think the underlying concept is important, and I appreciate the attempt to bring some efficiencies to government.

MAGEE: Can I throw one dart in this? (Laughter.) I mean, again from a program manager's perspective, these are all good. Nobody can argue with program management skills and business case. So the devil is always in how you implement that. And what I've seen, again, as from program management, some organizations maybe were further along in how they implemented this, but now we have four or five different flavors of business case.

We have an OMB version of a business case. I have DOD-acquisition-imposed versions of the business case. There are congressionally imposed, Clinger-Cohen-imposed versions of business cases. So, thank God for Microsoft Word, we cut and paste all this.

But this is an area where some rationalization in our enterprise would help the people who are actually trying to provide this information because I suspect almost everybody is doing it.

These are good things and almost everybody was doing it, because they had to manage their portfolios to determine value trade-offs and manage budgets. And I'm seeing the proliferation; everybody thinks business cases are wonderful, so every tier in our leadership is coming up with a different flavor of them.

BAILEY: I think the fundamental problem is that we're confusing means and ends. And these are clearly a means to an end. And some are treating them as if they're ends.

Enterprise architecture might be a good example of that. If you view that as the end, then you're going to create this elaborate, voluminous, beautiful piece of work that will sit on the shelf and be of no value; whereas if you see it as a means to an end, then you approach it quite differently. And the private is actually quite different. So I think it's very, very important to keep that in mind. That's not the end. It's a means.

TEMIN: Well, I'll quote Karen Evans, who is not with us. She's CIO over at Energy. She has repeatedly said that the notion of getting to green is not the goal, but really the starting point of doing great things; that you have to be green from the OMB definition in order to have a launch pad to do what you really want to do. Would that be a fair way to characterize it?

CHENOK: Yes. I would agree, and I would agree entirely with Skip there. They are tools. They're good repeatable process tools, if you will hearken back to our earlier conversation, to get you to a modernization goal that's about better service and better performance.

TEMIN: Let’s move on to that question regarding silos, both functionally and in terms of information systems. So what are some ways that we can de-silo or open up those and get working together as organizations?

BAILEY: I think for one, maybe more unique to our organization, but certainly defense has this issue, and that's the issue of security. How we can leverage technology to allow us to both share and be secure is I think, for us, the key to being able to really integrate, not being so much of a silo. I think that's a major focus of this. How do we securely share information?

TEMIN: You talked about that earlier this morning, Debra, about the cross-functional sharing. Do you want to elaborate?

SONDERMAN: Sure. Well, I would look at it from a slightly different perspective. I think one way to break down the silos is to share common performance metrics, so that it gets back to the thing about the business case being a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. The goal of contracting is not to have a perfect contract. The goal of contracting is to accomplish some mission, but a lot of times the folks who are doing that, you know, you can fill in the blanks, substitute any other functional area, and it's easy to get trapped into thinking that, you know, the perfect voucher is what we're all about. So I think some higher-level common performance metrics.

And doing the teaming and the partnering with people, working on projects together is the best way that I've seen to actually break down the silos. Then you build the trust.

There's a certain quality among the partners and respect that, you know on one issue, I'm going to let Ira make the final decision because he knows more than I do in that area. On another issue, he'll let me make the decision. And that's the kind of give-and-take that we need to have within the organization.

And the people, the worker bees, see that in the leaders, and it gives them confidence that there is a common vision about where you're going, and that everybody can move forward together regardless of who they report to.

MAGEE: Yes. I would agree. A common vision and a group of metrics or a balanced scorecard or whatever, so everybody understands how you're measuring achievement to that. I mean, we're a complex organization. People complain about silos, but you've got to organize an organization some way to achieve complex missions, and doing it functionally probably makes more sense than most ways to do that. The key is to get most of those functional communities pulling in the same direction. And, again, the key is having a common set of metrics. So you're not rewarding behavior that's contrary to where you want to take the organization.

HOBBS: You've got to get people out of where they are, you know. And this is a little editorial for AFFIRM. Now, we sent a whole bunch of our folks to AFFIRM. Why? So they hear something different. They interact with a different group of people. They're not constantly being reinforced with the values that are there in the organization, because we're trying to change those values.

Yes, you've got to organize some kind of way, when the day is said and done. You've got to have something that you can point to and say, "Here's where I belong, but that's not where, you know, I'm locked up and chained to." And so being able to look at interdisciplinary activities, both within your department and outside of your department is very critical to where we're going. People have to see the world for the world itself, not just for my little acre, my little part of the farm.

And that's what you've got to do. It's like sending the administrative people out to see a farm, because a lot of them never have. You know, you've got to do that, so that they develop a certain understanding of who our customers are, because we do get in these organizations and believe that information technology for the sake of information technology is the mission of the department. And it's not. It is about helping citizens in the activities that we engage in. But you've got to help people to see that. And whereas I'd like to think that that's what leaders do, in most organizations, you're finding out that's what the employees are doing.

More leaders need to look to their employees in terms of the modeling of behaviors that employees are getting into, because they've got networks all over the country. Generally, it's leaders who are more isolated these days because of what everybody perceives, all my demands on my work, all my other kinds of things.

But I think that's how we start breaking down the silo mentality, is by engaging people more in interdisciplinary activity that requires them to bring more to the table than just what they think, but an understanding of how all the other pieces fit into this process that make us accomplish something good.

OUVERSON: I agree with what was on the list, but just an observation is that something that's not on the list is technology, I think. Technology is not on the list as a way to break down silos. And I think that's correct, and yet often times that's the solution we seek. "Buy me some new middleware to connect my applications, hook up procurement to payments. Or buy me a data warehouse, build me a data warehouse so I can bring data together and report it across my business lines."

That's often the solution we look for, and yet I agree, that's really not the problem that needs to be solved. It's the ones that Ira mentioned.

KOWALSKI: The information technology, it's there. The technology is there. It's how it's applied to the business problem.

OUVERSON: Technology can certainly help. Don't get me wrong. Absolutely.

KOWALSKI: It's not going to solve everything, because this is, from my perspective, more of a people and an organizational situation.

Again, it's easier for us to fix, because [there’s] one guy making it happen, but an organizational approach might be to look at critical business processes in that organization and truly understand what the silos are that business flow really cuts across.

It's looking at what is the mission and what are the key processes and who are the key stakeholders that own bits and pieces of that process and bringing together a cross-functional team that would look a lot like the people in this room because you have a cross representation right in this room.

Again, it's more about the business flow than it is, you know, a data element or a niche process that just does procurement or just does asset management. You need to look at the full life cycle of that asset, from acquisition to inventory to maintenance to retirement of that asset. … And I know when you get in a complex organization, it's very difficult, but, it's getting those stakeholders to really come together. And that was really the way I think we resolved it, but we were more forced to do that.

TEMIN: The topic of information sharing and security came up, and as we get more matrixed and look within our agencies and agency-to-agency, the issue of security of data, both in terms of safety and also in terms of the statutory and regulatory prohibitions against who can use what data for what purpose comes up.

So how do we balance all that? What are you looking at to get more matrixed and more sharing and yet protect assets that, for whatever reason, have to be protected. I'm sorry that Skip had to leave, because FBI is dealing with that head-on right now, but I think every agency is to a degree.

ENOK: There are three pieces—there are many pieces, but I would think there are three big ones. At the top is what I call good policy, and this is we're accountable for creating an environment that allows the agencies to be able to do this, given all of the strictures and rules, as we've said. We can do that through issuing a policy that allows for secure sharing appropriately.

The second piece would be good security programs within agencies, so that as they're implementing the policy, there's confidence both from an OMB, Congress, GAO oversight perspective as well as a perspective of the user community who's interacting with that agency, that there are sound security practices being channeled in there.

And the third thing, I think, is good technology. You know, this is an area where I do think technology can be more of a key part of the solution than maybe the people on the process side, because secure authentication technologies, well done XML, data sharing frameworks, peer-to-peer, distributed decision-making technologies are about grabbing data rather than collecting it at one place. They are all things that allow for greater agility, greater sharing, but also possibly greater security or, at least, maintaining security.

TEMIN: A follow-up comment to that? Good exposition on how it can happen? Kim.

NELSON: Well, I agree with all of those things. And one of the things that we have to do to make those things occur is go back to the partnerships that are important.

Here in the federal government, critical partnerships in my organization, and many others I know, are with states and local governments. And how you take what we're doing here horizontally and also work with partnerships in the state and local government is an action that has to occur, and one that's very resource intensive and time consuming. But to make that secure environment that we have to have, to do peer-to-peer and data sharing and the kind of integration we want to do to get the big picture, to make the best decisions require that kind of effort. It's something that's not easy to do, as was said, and very time consuming.

MAGEE: This is an area that industry could help us with tremendously because if we could get very agreed-upon standards that COTS solutions and things like that are built to, and everybody recognizes the same certification processes, that would make it much easier. Right now, there's confusion about some of those issues. And so you have different people at different stages agreeing to different standards.

BARNES: I think it really starts with stepping back and looking at your entire infrastructure and approaching it from a security standpoint, so that when you're actually developing or evolving that infrastructure, it builds in security as much as you do office automation, desktop support in your system development approaches.

And if you do that, you think about "What is the business I'm trying to do? And then how do I secure my platforms to take care of the business that's appropriate to my agency? What do I put in place in terms of intrusion detection, my firewall setup, my servers, my desktops? How does that all play?"

It's so that in effect you overlay on your infrastructure an entire design setup with the security that's appropriate, which is a cost and risk based assessment, appropriate for the business you need to do.

If you set up that infrastructure in advance and take a design approach to it, when you develop your systems, they should more or less fall into that, so you're not rethinking and redesigning your security every time. You're simply evaluating a delta between the specific system you're trying to do and what you've already got in place.

And so I believe that's a key component to being agile and yet addressing the security issues.

HOBBS: One point that I'd like to add, and it's an old cliche, but security is everybody's business. Too often, the onus and the responsibility is left on the IT community, and not nearly as much on our business community and a lot of times, you know, in the hustle and bustle to get stuff out there in the marketplace, a lot of our vendors let us down.

We're talking more and more to commercial off-the-shelf. Well, if every time we go commercial off-the-shelf we've got to go through 15 iterations before we get to a point of being secure, that's an issue for us. But it boils back down to it being everybody's business within our organization, not just the cybersecurity staff where everyone is looking to them for security solutions.

TEMIN: To follow up on Dan Chenok's comment regarding how technology can probably help in this particular area, I know that the Homeland Security Department and [CIO] Steve Cooper have mentioned looking at their data sharing mission because they have to share data or at least obtain data from agencies that can't share it, like security at NSA, CIA and so forth. They're looking for technical solutions that may create markers to the location of information so at least they know what pot they need to dig in, but then beyond that, then you would have the means to get a court order or whatever was required, if it's, in fact, something you wouldn't ordinarily have a statutory right to.

CHENOK: Right. They don't have to get all the data and sift through it, in case they need to find the needle. But they wait until they have the need for the needle, and then they go get it.

TEMIN: It's almost like a house-search paradigm, if you will. You know it's in there, but you just can't go barging in. You need whatever you're required to have by law to go there.
Further comments, tech stuff? Security?

KOWALSKI: A couple of comments. One, I'm very encouraged about the federal enterprise architecture and the statements around security needing to be at the ground up. And from my perspective, parochially that would be the database. (Laughter.) And, you know, and I'm liking a lot of what I hear about security. They're putting the locks on all the windows and doors of the bank, but not on the vault itself.

What about the insider threat? Most of the violations are from insider threats. And unless the security policy is enforced at the data level, you've got issues there. So you can have all
the encryption, and PKI, and everything else, but if you're not addressing the insider threat, then certainly there are issues there.

I will also say there's a policy on the DOD side that talks about the notion that for COTS products thou shall select evaluated product, third-party evaluated product. It used to be NSA that evaluated. Now, you know, there are other entities that do that.

I'm sorry; this will be a commercial. We've put tens of millions of research and development dollars into that years ago. I don't know how many of you remember "C2 by ‘92." Well, this is 2003, and still you don't see that in RFPs that come out, solicitations, you know. And, again, there is evaluated technology there, and we rarely see it cited as a requirement.

So I'll just throw that out there, that there is evaluated technology, and we don't hear it being called for as much as one might think in today's world.

TEMIN: Well, it's fair to say that the biggest security data breaches have come from people that we trust. I mean, there's been probably half a dozen really, you know, poster-boy examples in the last five years. And to lock that down in some ways might seem to work against the agility and collegiality and trust that you require. I don't have an answer. I'm just wondering if anyone has further comment on that.

CHENOK: The agency's internal security program isn't just about "Where are the firewalls, and how high is the wall?" It's about management training, regular, to remind everybody that it's their business …

TEMIN: Yes. And also good judgment because sometimes, often in the aftermath of these cases, there has been a systemic failure of management.

CHENOK: Security underlies all of the e-government projects.

DODD: All of them.

CHENOK: Yes. It's a key part of all of them.

TEMIN: In this whole area of achieving agility and these management imperatives, what kind of training is required? Is there sufficient training now? And maybe, Janet, we'll start with you on that one, from your OPM hat more than your CIO hat.

BARNES: I need to think about this for a minute.

HOBBS: Well, you know, there's never enough training, Tom. (Laughter.) But the training is out there. I don't think the emphasis, though, is on agility, because when you start talking about leadership, though we want consistency in leadership, adaptation is certainly very critical to that work effort. So I think it's out there. I just don't think that they have been emphasizing the agility part of it itself.

Now, someone might come up with a track that deals with this. As you say, this is a growing buzzword kind of a thing that may, in fact, you know, last for a few years, but …

TEMIN: Not when we're done with it.

HOBBS: OK. Not when we're done with it. But I don't think that there is anything that, specifically, that you could point to that said, "This is, of course, about how you help your organization become more agile," though I think that's probably embedded in a lot of the management and development training that's out there and available today.

BARNES: A follow-up comment, actually, occurred to me earlier and that has to do with the leadership and the culture change to be able to well.

Let me step back. Have you ever gone to a structured facilitative session where they say, "We're leaving our little hats at the door, and we're putting on our big hats"? (Laughter.) And you go in the room, and it is against human nature to take yourself totally out of who you are in your piece of the world that you're controlling and managing, to think governmentwide, and to think about how we can be better as a government.

And underlying a lot of what we've been talking about, of how the government becomes agile, requires these partnerships and to be able to take advantage of and see other opportunities that exist maybe not within your own organization.

I don't need to own the iron, as we used to say about owning a data center, but I don't think that comes naturally. And I don't know how we easily get people to elevate their thinking to look governmentwide.

Now, I have a growing appreciation for some of the leadership strides that I, perhaps, didn't appreciate about a year ago in terms of actually forcing this governmentwide look. I think the enterprise architecture—you have to get out of your skin to be able to do a real enterprise architecture, to be able to take a look at these e-gov initiatives and figure out how they can work, to be able to say, "We're bringing up these new systems. Now, how are you going to migrate and use them?"

I think what we're trying to do—maybe it's not training per se—is force this thinking on at least some subset of the community, and then that hopefully can be pushed out. But I think this is a very hard and perhaps underappreciated talent and ability.

And I don't think it comes naturally. So it's a little off point, but I think that's where we need to be if we really want to create an agile government.

NELSON: I would say, as a follow-up on that, because when I read the question, training didn't strike me as a need as much as having the employees see others model the right behavior. You know, I don't think you can send somebody off to an agility course. I think they have to constantly see the leaders in their organization doing it and actually behaving in that way, for them to [know] that they're not going to be penalized if they, too, behave that way.

I'll give you an example. We did a major procurement last year. We did it outside of EPA, went to the General Services Administration, and we did a major procurement off the Millennia contract, I think it's called. There was a lot of consternation within our organization about that, our own procurement staff, because they felt we were bypassing them. And yet that contract was put there for the benefit of the federal government.

Somebody shouldn't feel they're being penalized or take that negatively if somebody else behaves in an enterprisewide manner. So we have to get people to understand that that's OK, and there's nothing wrong with that.

So what we tried to do in turn was say, "OK. Our next major procurement we'll try to do in-house and create an enterprisewide procurement vehicle that other agencies can use, you know, so that our procurement office got the benefit of that."

And that's the kind of culture that's still there. We have to model different behavior.

MAGEE: That's true. Never be surprised when people do things in their own self-interest. If people perceive change and things like that as a threat to their self-interest, and the environment and the reward systems and things don't make them feel better about that or protect them from that, people will act the way they tend to act.

BARNES: And isn't that a good point? Is the reward system set up so that people who really do think governmentwide can end up really feeling like they've achieved something even beyond what they could by improving the positioning of their agency?

CHENOK: And we view some of the e-government monies through the CIO Council and through the fund to provide some of that cross-cutting rewarding of behavior that cuts across.

Each agency has its own rules for performance appraisals and its own standards. I don't know whether OPM, and I'm out of my league here, publishes governmentwide standards for how agencies are supposed to do that or not.

BARNES: Not at a detailed level.

CHENOK: But at a high level?

BARNES: Well, they encourage, for example, performance-based appraisal systems, but you can have a whole set of different ones.

CHENOK: I mean, it might be part of a human capital agenda discussion to basically say "Maybe we want to have a discussion about the reward system," and having a specific line in a performance appraisal criteria that says "Have you collaborated?" I mean, that's an inelegant way of seeing it.

TEMIN: We are almost to the end. I'd like to ask the final question, and then go around the table and have everyone give one or two sentences on that, and we'll wind up from there.

The information technology infrastructure that supports all of what we do has been described as a flimsy cockpit door of IT systems. That's from retired Lt. Gen. Minahan. Are we that flimsy and vulnerable? And how can we fix this, consistent with agility? Anyone want to make a stab at the flimsy cockpit door?

DODD: I can almost see where I think that statement is coming from. For one, I might also build on another comment, that infrastructure can tie you down. And instead of being flimsy, I'll say mobile kind of a concept, if you've already bought into one system or a software package or some technology, then that kind of defines and may create a particular path that you have to follow for certain functions. So in that case, it almost provides a straitjacket.

I don't know that I would agree with the first comment. I certainly don't agree with the second comment about it—technology being truly defining—or it shouldn't be.

We should have flexibility, and it shouldn't be dependent on—I'm convinced certainly after hearing from the different speakers here—culture is so much more important than a specific technology.

You have got to get people with the right mind-sets, the right reward structure, the right training, whatever that is, to be willing to keep an open mind and to think more broadly than they've perhaps been brought up to do.

HOBBS: If I'm interpreting the question correctly about the information technology infrastructure, what I would say is that our infrastructure in many instances has been created by happenstance, convenience of opportunity as opposed to a very-well-thought-out and structured approach.

We took advantage of funds when they were made available, and we did what we could, not necessarily that we had a modernization effort that guided us. What we need to do—and that's left us in a lot of instances somewhat ill-equipped—is to meet the demands that the citizens in this country now are imposing on us. So to a large extent now, we are scrambling to do what needs to be done.

There's an expression over in my part of town that "program is king." OK. And what that simply means is that if you're on the administrative side, infrastructure side, right, you get what's left, you know, what gets swept off the table. There really isn't a real clear plate that's yours. And because of that, we have fallen behind the times. And right now we're scrambling to catch up.

What it's going to take is exactly the things we've talked about a couple of questions back: good architecture; a real focus on managing from a project sense what we have to ensure that what we need and where we're going; good solid, sound business cases that articulate why we are doing it.

That's what we have to do. That holds the key to the promises that we're making to the American citizens about having a citizen-centric government.

CHENOK: Yes, this in my view, I'm one of those people who builds the truck that runs on the highways. And I think one of the dangers of our business case approach is I'm always evaluating the truck, and we are making decisions about the truck, and we tend to ignore the highway.

So it's almost a microcosm of the classic dilemma of, "Somebody else will build the highway," because there's really no immediate business case for the highway. It's only for the trucks operating on the highway.

That's why I think you really need an enlightened leadership with respect to our portfolios and maybe in general to say, "Hey, this is the interstate system of the future," and it is a national resource that our existing portfolio processes are never going to adequately resource. Because they're going to be business case, return-on-investment-focused and will tend to ignore the need to have that robust highway.

OUVERSON: I think the points are all covered. Maybe one thing to add is at the enterprise level, however you define it, having a consistent approach to security—so that the people who are building trucks know the highway they're going to be going down before they start building the truck—is absolutely key.

NELSON: One of the things I've been talking to people about is sort of our storefront business vs. the back-end business. And I think one of the reasons we have the problems we have in government is the vendors who say it can be all things to all people. I mean, government organizations have tried to do that.

We've tried to do everything within their domain. And I think more and more we've realized that, with outsourcing, we don't need to do that. So I think as organizations if we focus on our storefront business, whether it's defense or serving the agricultural community or protecting the environment, and get out of the back-end business and outsource that more and more, then we fix this problem, because we get the agility we need.

With our new performance-based contract, for instance, I can turn around now and say, "This is the standard you have to meet. I don't care how you meet it. I don't care if you have to go out and buy five more new machines. I don't have to deal with that procurement. This is the standard you have to meet."

That's going to allow us to keep up the technology. It's going to allow us to be agile to support our front-end business.

So I think that's how we have to start fixing these problems—getting people to focus on their storefront business and recognize all these other things that historically were done and now may be a threat to people because we talk about not doing them. We just have to make those management decisions.

CHENOK: The highway analogy, I think, is a good one. And I think what we've gotten now is an infrastructure layer that is a layer of like cobblestone, pavement, cement. As Ira said, it gets built up over time. You know, we don't have a smooth road. And one of the goals that we have, one of the explicit goals we have is in this idea of a single business case for infrastructure, to do exactly what you're describing, Dan. [We want] agencies to try to look at the highway as a whole, because … they may have done it, but we've never asked for it systematically.

So that the infrastructure business case that's going to come in is going to take a look at office automation, infrastructure, telecom.

How do they trade off together to provide that framework that can allow for the agile mission-based, outward, customer-focused stuff to ride more smoothly? And so we think that will ultimately increase the agility of those mission-based applications.

KOWALSKI: In addressing Gen. Minahan's comment from NSA I think the pilot may be analogous to the data that he's suggesting is vulnerable.

And we have a phrase that we like to use when talking about security, and that's "defense through depth." And going back to a consistent security policy and implementation, at the architectural or at the ground-up layer, planning for that as you are embarking on your enterprise architecture is key, so defense through depth.

BARNES: In thinking about this question, I was thinking about my own agency and trying to understand where our flimsy cockpit door is relative to what we've done. We've had enterprise architecture now since 1996, and we did it because we needed it, not because we were told to do it. And I think that was critical.

We have got a standardized, centralized infrastructure, one infrastructure for all of OPM. And so it also builds in security. We've got a very well-defined set of systems, security controls, and we understand our different security layers, and it's built into our infrastructure, reflected in our enterprise architecture. And so it hangs together very nicely for us.

I think when I think about the flimsy cockpit door, then I say, "What are my vulnerabilities?" And to me it is the Internet. We're doing more and more business over the Internet, and we don't control it. It is not a government facility. It is a private facility. If you don't control it, you can't protect it.

And so to me somebody—a smart person, I would think, obviously, because there's so much redundancy built in—could take down major nodes, and our business would suffer. And so then it becomes incumbent upon us to plan our disaster recovery, our redundancy, our replication possibilities in thinking about alternative ways of doing business to help prevent against that happening.

Now, whether or not we can do anything about that as a government or should, again, is your risk and cost based decision to say, "OK. If this isn't a government-controlled environment, in the larger infrastructure context, do we create one for the government?" And I don't have an answer to that. That's beyond me.

But that's kind of where we are in terms of establishing layers of protection.

TEMIN: Well, we are out of time. Those are some terrific comments, and I thank you all.