

## Issue Brief

# The Four 'P's of Selecting an Effective IT Solution: A Checklist for CIOs

## Introduction

As senior officials entrusted with executive responsibility for information technology, CIOs play an important role in raising levels of productivity, efficiency and efficacy in government. Where it may be more difficult for other government officials to recognize the potential for savings presented by the right IT solutions, CIOs are familiar with how technology can improve work systems throughout bureaucratic operations. However, while a portfolio of top-dollar IT solutions might bring exceptional change to the way an agency works, or allow for more cohesive communication across departments, it is well known that unlimited funding is not available to back technology purchases.

When CIOs do have the latitude to invest in technology, it is important that systems and improvements are chosen thoughtfully. Selecting the ideal IT provider and platform can be challenging in a world with many competitors and product options. The following checklist provides some guidelines for CIOs looking to select broad-level IT solutions for government. Overall, it is important to think about four main areas: product, platform, price and partnership.

## Product

A well-chosen enterprise solution can reduce costs, increase efficiencies and maximize the use of personnel in ways that best serve constituents. However, to achieve these benefits, it is important to select a comprehensive product. Many vendors offer IT solutions that fix highly specific issues, but a system that has broader effects is much more useful. A product that addresses multiple purposes can be leveraged more expansively and create efficiencies in numerous areas.

Additionally, it is important that an IT product be flexible without having to replace the entire system when something new arises, or without having to create a patchwork of products from multiple IT providers that are not interoperable. Some products now offer "point-and-click" manipulability, which allows for changes to be made to address current needs without having to pay for expensive and time-consuming code to be written to update a product.

Sometimes it helps to do a bit of investigating into a product and the company behind it. For example, are developers working together to create a product, ensuring consistency over time, or are products simply pieced together from various other sources, leading to more vulnerabilities? It is worthwhile to consider the history of the company in which you are investing, as well. Since



IT is such a rapidly changing field, you want to select a provider that you can be assured will be around long enough to support your solution, long term.

## Considerations

When looking for a comprehensive IT product that will benefit government functioning with greater flexibility, accessibility and efficiency, think about the following:

- ✓ What is the scope of the product? Is it foundational, versus something that solves problems in a piecemeal fashion?
- ✓ Is it something that can be leveraged for multiple purposes and department needs?
- ✓ What kind of accessibility is offered by the product? Can it be made available to workers in different locations or those working remotely?
- ✓ Does the product connect various applications and enhance the interoperability of systems?
- ✓ Does the product offer centralized storage for data and documents so that information can be accessed across programs and departments?
- ✓ What do analysts in the industry say about the product or vendor?
- ✓ Has the vendor been established in the industry for awhile?

## Platform

An important aspect of a comprehensive solution is that it is adaptable to government's (often changing) needs. Considering up front whether a product has the potential to be altered at a later

time, and what these changes may cost, are critical to ensure it will adapt to future needs without wasting precious dollars. Hidden costs can often arise when attempting to change a platform to meet specific requirements. Rather than settling for a suite of products that cannot be tailored, select a modular system where various options can be selected to best fit your specific needs, and avoid unnecessary spending on functions that are not needed.

### **Considerations**

When thinking about the right platform to select, consider the following:

- ✓ Does the platform come one-size-fits-all, or is it adaptable to your specialized needs?
- ✓ Do you have the option to start small and add functionalities down the road?
- ✓ Does the platform allow you to share services and data across users?
- ✓ Do you have options in where the platform is hosted? In how the platform is deployed?

### **Price**

As with any major purchase, you want to get the most for your money, but in the IT world, this can mean something different than simply finding the product with the most bells and whistles at the lowest cost. With some vendors, the process of selecting a product, adapting it to fit your needs, testing it, training on it and finally reaching operability ends up costing many times what was charged for the software itself. While the cost of software may seem outwardly reasonable, it may take extensive customization to make the software work for an organization's specific needs. Even then, a company will charge extra for test and development versions of their solution — a critical step in having a functioning system. Therefore, it is fundamental to consider what costs are behind the software's implementation, and not just how it is priced outright. It is also important to know what kind of support is available to users down the road. Consider up front whether tech support is included in maintenance, or whether it has additional costs, and how accessible it is. You want your users to be able to access support when they need it, not just when the vendor makes it available.

### **Considerations**

When thinking about the costs involved in an IT solution, consider the following:

- ✓ How much will it cost to customize the software to fit your needs? How long has it taken to implement similar projects among the vendor's customers?
- ✓ Are you forced to purchase things you don't need as part of a pre-packaged set? Are they flexible?

- ✓ Are test and development instances provided for free or are you forced to buy additional licenses?
- ✓ What kind of tech support is available? Does it cost to access it, or is it included in maintenance? What hours can it be accessed, and what resources are there to help (i.e. automated, or live person)?

### **Partnership**

Finally, CIOs should consider the value in establishing long-term partnerships with IT vendors that support their ongoing needs. It is important to think about whether the vendor is well-versed in providing solutions that fit the unique needs of government, has an established track record of success, and is interested in collecting and responding to customer feedback. A quality vendor will be invested in ensuring its clients are fully trained to use the systems they purchase, including making training easily accessible. The same applies to the functionality of the system. Some companies do not train their customers to be self-sufficient on the adaptability of their system, forcing clients to hire the company back to implement any needed changes. Having the capacity to change one's own system can reduce costs in the long run, so it is important to make sure this option is available.

### **Considerations**

When choosing the right IT provider to partner with, think about the following:

- ✓ Is the IT partner an established entity that you can rely on being around for years to come, and that has government expertise? Is your solution part of the core business of the vendor, or was it an acquired technology?
- ✓ What kind of system training is made available by the IT partner — is it available remotely, or is travel to training necessary? Is training on the system an additional cost?
- ✓ Are there requirements that the IT partner be the one to make any changes on the system, or is the system something you can own outright and learn how to manipulate internally?
- ✓ How accessible is the IT partner to its customers?
- ✓ How much has been spent to enhance or improve the system? Are new versions included in your annual maintenance?

### **Final Thoughts**

Keeping in mind these considerations in the areas of product, platform, price and partnership, CIOs can make informed choices that enhance government operations with technology. Investing in smart solutions will help accomplish many core goals of government — including improving efficiency, reducing costs and providing more constituent services — and enhance public service for years to come.

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