

IT

By Charles Mandel

THE STEADY HAND

As the CIO for the Government of Canada, Jim Alexander tries to keep his mission simple – making meaningful changes that can be achieved quarter by quarter, year by year

In his spare time, Jim Alexander gardens – professing a fondness for the purple coneflower in particular. But perennial plants aren't the only thing the Ottawa resident is cultivating. Alexander is the CIO for the Government of Canada, arguably the nation's top information technology professional – and he's busy weeding out unnecessary duplication within the federal public service's information management program. This streamlining is both Alexander's vision and his challenge.

On the one hand, Alexander talks about seeking out opportunities to transform what he describes as individual entities in the Canadian government into a single enterprise. On the other, he concedes that's not such an easy goal. "It can be large and daunting and therefore hard to make progress on it if you just leave it that size," he says. "Part of that challenge is to find very concrete things that can be done quarter by quarter, year by year."

Alexander calls the process daunting for good reason. Some 200 people alone work under him in the Treasury Board Secretariat, where he also controls a \$25-million annual budget. In turn, Alexander and that budget influence another 25 to 30 departmental CIOs in the federal service, whose combined information management budget amounts to approximately \$5-billion a year. Roughly a third of that goes to salaries, with the rest making its way out to the private sector. While much of the latter spending is tied up in multi-year relationships, Alexander says he likes vendors to advise him on what other jurisdictions have done to tackle IT and IM challenges. "Vendors often have a unique perspective on that."

Alexander breaks down the transformation into several key policy areas. One is a shared service approach for infrastructure to ensure it's both robust and agile. The second is to provide a single system solution for human resources and

financial services, and a third is the challenge for the departmental CIOs is to stay closely connected with the business in their individual departments, but also work within the framework of the overall enterprise systems architecture that Alexander is maneuvering into place for the Government of Canada. The fourth part, according to Alexander, may be the most difficult: to stay aware of the entire process and all its constituent parts and integrate them together.

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It's a heck of a task for a guy who originally had his sights set on being a nuclear physicist. Alexander grew up in British Columbia, doing his undergraduate degree in physics at the University of Victoria and his Masters in Nuclear Physics at the University of British Columbia. Upon leaving school he looked for a job that combined practical and theoretical science, which led him to employment as a meteorologist with the federal weather service, where he ultimately ended up as head of information technology with the weather service and then as Environment Canada's (parent department of the weather service) chief of IT.

"Sometimes the leadership CIOs come from business and sometimes they come from the IT side of things," Alexander says. In his case, moving from the weather office was equivalent to stepping up from the business side. In 1999, he joined the federal Treasury Board to create the concept of a common infrastructure for "citizen-centred" services, before becoming Acting CIO in October 2005.

Even while Alexander pushes ahead with his vision, he's weathering the change in government from Liberal to Conservative, something the

CIO is sanguine about. While he says they're still in discussions with the new incoming administration, Alexander points out that the public servant's job is to adjust to a new government and new ways of doing business, and provide them with the best policy advice possible. "There's a lot of dialogue and listening going on right now following the change in government."

Given Alexander's already high profile, where does he envision himself next? Alexander notes his position allows him to influence and set the context for much of the service policy and delivery in the federal government. "I would want something like that for my next job," he says, adding that any challenge he took on in the future would have to offer plenty of intellectual stimulation as well as the ability to steer the corporation. "But at the moment," Alexander says, "what we're doing here is tremendously exciting."



JIM ALEXANDER