

State Department Plans to Modernize Diplomatic Posts Around the World

The CIO pitches a strategy to uniformly modernize an otherwise federated and globally dispersed agency.

[Melissa Harris](#)

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A new State Department IT strategy will "accelerate the pace of diplomacy" across the agency's global posts, CIO Stuart McGuigan said Tuesday.

During the ACT-IAC Community of Interest Meeting, McGuigan said he looks to prioritize data, machine learning, cloud computing, cybersecurity and a focus on workforce development in his strategy, which he also said is rooted in the overall strategy and intent of the State Department's mission at large.

The agency's IT strategy has five broad steps, first extrapolating from its mission focus and building from there to examine current legacy services and roadmap the future path to modernization. Those steps include:

The mission focus. This involves absorbing diplomatic priorities from top State leadership, including information on the nation's international strategies, as well as workforce and budgeting concerns to mission.

Use data and systems. IT leadership will use data and analytics to examine inputs — which include data on national strategy, staffing levels, the 276 posts that the department supports across the world. The State Department intends to use machine learning to cluster diplomatic posts with similar technological needs to identify the various modernization blueprints for each type of post.

“We have an analytical way of determining what we need, and if they change the focus in a country — they scale down, scale up, pivot — we can run that through the same machinery to reestablish what the [IT] baseline is, so this is a living, breathing prioritization planning mechanism,” McGuigan explained. “If we do this properly and continue to do this, we can make the leadership decision that no post will ever go without the technology it needs in order to accomplish its mission.”

Determine infrastructure required. As the State Department determines what IT each posts requires, McGuigan and his team plan to determine the number and types of devices each post will need, requirements posts have in terms of internet and radio connectivity, as well as mobility, cybersecurity and cloud DevOps needs.

Examine the current state of IT. Before beginning the processes to modernize posts' IT assets and infrastructure, the State Department will take stock of current IT in use, such as legacy systems and services, current bandwidth available, telephony and storage capabilities, among others.

Develop the roadmaps. With current and needed IT identified, McGuigan and his team can start hashing out costs, schedules and priorities for each type of post, delivering blueprints for clusters of diplomatic posts that require the same modernization needs in an agile manner.

The State Department has established an Information Technology Executive Council to oversee these steps. The ITEC consists of IT leadership across all department bureaus, as well as working groups that will focus on a variety of areas. These include modernizing working groups for field posts, IT architecture, IT workforce, cybersecurity, and mobility and collaboration. An upcoming sixth working group will focus on process improvement and automation.

As the ITEC and State Department continue to work on broad technological modernization efforts, McGuigan emphasized that sharpening data use and analytics, machine learning, cloud capabilities and security are top priorities for improving diplomacy with IT.

While data, machine learning and cybersecurity will support leadership in the modernization process, cloud efforts are intended primarily to “untether” the diplomatic workforce from physical locations, allowing greater connectivity and flexibility.

"People are no longer tethered to physical locations," McGuigan said. "We can define infrastructure using software, so as our needs ebbs and flows, we can change our infrastructure capacity and capabilities. At the speed of software, we can dial up and I think just as important for resource allocation we can dial down and take advantage of that."

McGuigan reported that throughout the State Department’s modernization efforts, over 116,000 employee emails have migrated to the cloud, most diplomatic posts are in the cloud for content management, and the department has also optimized workflow capabilities and organizational data sharing with various cloud platforms.

The strategic intent that McGuigan and State Department IT leadership have planned around ultimately work toward human-centered, data-driven and mission-focused solutions — a trend that several agencies have pursued in their IT strategies as well.

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