



The Government 2.0 Leaders Series: A Conversation with John Suffolk, Chief Information Officer of the United Kingdom

In part one of our Government 2.0 Leaders Series, Anthony Williams, vice president of New Paradigm's Government 2.0 research program, speaks to John Suffolk, CIO of the UK Government, about his efforts to lead transformation in the public sector. Mr. Suffolk reflects on the challenge of making government look like a single entity from the citizen's perspective and describes the significant technological and cultural challenges that public sector agencies must overcome. But as Mr. Suffolk notes, constraints on the ability to share data and the need to provide security are not insurmountable barriers, but challenges that can be resolved by focusing on doing what is right for citizens.

Anthony D. Williams

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PART 1: GOVERNMENT TRANSFORMATION

Anthony Williams

I wanted to speak to you about some of the transformational projects that you have underway in the UK, in particular the issues and challenges that you're facing, and whether you've been thinking about employing Web 2.0 technologies in the various aspects of the UK public administration. So if you could start by reflecting on the evolution of government services within the UK government since 2000—a period wherein governments were investing heavily and thinking about how technologies could support transformation, and cheaper, more efficient, and more effective service provision.

John Suffolk:

Well, let me just give you a few words on the UK because the UK has, generally speaking, always worked at a national level. We don't have such a clear federal/state split present in many other jurisdictions. For example, we have national policing, national health, and national education; therefore, much of the technology that the UK has put in over the years is already at a national scale.

In the early 2000s the UK government invested a significant sum of money to e-enable or Web-enable all citizen-based transactions. And as of the last count we did, which was last year, we now cover 92% of government services on the Web.

Our efforts mirror those of the private sector. The first iteration of transformation focused on getting everything online. In generation two and generation three of the transformation, we have taken more of a process-based approach, wherein we will focus on the customer view rather than simply saying, "Let's just take an offline medium and make it an online medium."

Doing so is easier for us as we're well integrated at the local and national levels. For example, if you take housing benefits which are handed out locally in the 400 local authorities, these service agencies connect into a central benefit payments system. And there are numerous similar examples across our government: we

On "the role of the CIO"...

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On "Web 2.0"...

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— John Suffolk

have joined up law enforcement so that we have more than 8,000 automated number plate recognition cameras around the UK which scan number plates, and cross-reference this data against police, MOT car safety certificates, and insurance databases, all in less than a second. This is all about joining public and private sector efforts, and integrating the activities of multiple agencies.

Anthony Williams:

Clearly the UK has come a long way. What is the next stage in your government transformation agenda?

John Suffolk:

Despite these early successes we still have to answer one fundamental question and that is, “How do you make government or the public sector, in the UK’s case 5.8 million public servants, look like a single entity from a citizen’s perspective?” The citizen does not care whether they’re talking to the Taxation Department or the Benefit Department or the Health Department or Education Department, they want a consistent message and service window.

And there are challenges of scale, security and sophistication, as well as legal challenges as to what we can and cannot share. But these are all challenges, not barriers.

Unfortunately, a vast number of technology vendors today have no concept of how to construct something for a customer or a citizen—they think the world evolves around the Web but it doesn’t. Thus I read with bemusement analyst report after analyst report about how the Web 2.0 is fundamentally changing the makeup of society—and it will in some shape or form—but then I say, “what is it that citizens or customers want to do?” and the vast majority of the time they want to do a simple transaction, whether it be to pay their taxes, renew their driving licences or schedule a doctors appointment. That is not a Web 2.0 world. There is no rich media in the transaction-oriented world that citizens most often want. There is no social engineering. It’s a very short transaction—high volume, low touch, where the customer wants to get out of there as quickly as possible.

Therefore, on the topic of integration of services we need to go back to first principles where we use the minimum amount of time from a transaction perspective to deliver very reliable services to citizens or customers without overloading them with a whole host of information which is irrelevant in terms of their immediate transaction. Customers want very short, very fast, very easy to use and understand transactions.

Anthony Williams:

Surely you see some opportunities to leverage Web 2.0 capabilities to enrich the services that are delivered to citizens?

John Suffolk:

I do. Let me give you a real example. We’ve just launched an updated Web 2.0 world in our health space. We said if somebody wants to go and have a triple heart bypass operation or a knee operation, which are ideal spaces in a Web 2.0 world for rich media exchange related to those procedures. This includes case studies from citizens who’ve had the operation, videos of what will take place, and interactive formats that allow the user to ask questions such as “give me the success rate of heart operations for each individual surgeon.” Moreover, it will allow the user to book an appointment online, and even provide access to the medical material that the doctors and the consultants will use in preparation, information that is far beyond what is available via Yahoo or a Google. In essence, it’s a perfect Web 2.0 world where you want a richness of information, and where interaction adds tremendous value as this process is based on research and not transactions. And then when they want to drop into a transaction, they drop into a transaction. That transition is a most clever design, and it isn’t about being seduced by whatever the latest technology is, but rather about the focus on the end-user.

So our challenge for integration is quite simple. We have to be able to segregate transactions from information requests, and when we do that then we can begin to continue our integration efforts which we have been doing over the last number of years.

Anthony Williams:

Let me follow up on the discussion of Web 2.0 as I like the dichotomy you've presented, between on the one hand providing simple transactions, and on the other hand providing access to rich sources of information, potentially even collaboration between citizens themselves. One of the areas where Web 2.0 can drive innovation is in the use of collaboration technologies inside the workplace.

John Suffolk:

One of the things we've done in the UK is to launch the "10 Downing Street—e-Petitions" Web site. UK citizens have always had the ability to take a box-load of signed petitions to the Prime Minister's door at Number 10. What we've now done is to put this process online, in a collaborative space. Initially, everyone thought this was a gimmick but suddenly people, i.e. citizens, started to use it. People started to do viral marketing in terms of "here's a petition that I've started, please sign it and send it in." What's fundamentally important however is that we've noticed that when the size of one of these petitions reaches one or one-and-a-half million signatures, the media picks up on it. The result is that these petitions have had a fundamental impact on policy development.

But just having a petitions Web site doesn't do it. Therefore my thinking, and my model in terms of strategy, is that it would be wrong to think that in any country in the world we, i.e. government policy makers, have the answers to all of the policy challenges that we face or that are present in our communities. We don't necessarily know how to stop unwanted teenage pregnancy or how to stop people taking drugs or how to stop people from committing or recommitting crimes. Therefore I think the social networking space, including the blog and wiki worlds, can play a major role by first of all posting the problem online, and then stimulating a discussion or debate about the issue.

I think these worlds can help us not only design policy and strategy but also work out how sophisticated the solution needs to be, right down to "well, okay guys, now that you've got a view in terms of what the problem is and what the options are to solve the problem, tell us who you think has solved it, tell us the kinds of products and services that we could be using."

This could potentially be a very powerful tool in terms of solution design.

Anthony Williams:

What are some of the challenges in scaling up the vision of citizen engagement you just described?

John Suffolk:

We're kind of still scratching our heads around how to handle the legality of this strategy, as well as the procurement and control issues that necessarily result. And evidently, you need to think about how this world interacts with special interest groups, as well as with those who do not have access to these technologies. But really it's only a matter of time before we and others go down that route, it's the logical thing to do.

PART 2: THE NET GENERATION AND GOVERNMENT

Anthony Williams:

The Net Generation—the first generation of digital natives who have grown up socialized with digital technologies—are arguably one of the most significant drivers in the transformation of government. New Paradigm is investigating how their expectations as a generation are different in three important relationships with government. As citizens: how do we reengage this generation in democracy and create transparent and participatory policy making processes that encourage young people to participate. As customers: how do their expectations as customers of public services differ from previous generations and what can public service providers do to meet their demands for speedy, innovative and customizable services. And finally, as employees: what do public sector organizations need to do to attract and retain young people, and how can public sector organizations compete with the private sector in the talent marketplace as they prepare to cope with the massive wave of retirement that is looming in the very near future.

John Suffolk:

Anyone who was born after 1985 was brought up in the digital era, and their outlook on life is fundamentally different. They don't see technology as anything exciting because it's a bit like electricity. It's a utility they expect to be there. The other side of the equation is that when you begin to look at what company workforce profiles will be in 2020, and taking into consideration today's education system and today's technology, the gap will continue to widen between the skills required and the supply thereof as the invention rate of technology continues to accelerate.

We have a whole host of work going on in terms of addressing these challenges. Not only from a professionalization perspective, but also working with schools and universities to begin to fix IT training for those that need these skills in the generation going forward. The second challenge is how do you create a secure environment where basically people can work from wherever they're comfortable, i.e. how to make the technology come to them, and not the other way around. And in the public sector that can be quite difficult given the needs for data security and privacy.

So what we're trying to recognize is that people work differently today than they did previously, and we need to move people to a place most comfortable to them. We need the work to follow them, and subsequently we need human resource policies and security policies to facilitate that.

Anthony Williams:

Can you provide some examples where departments have made significant changes to address the needs and expectations of the N-Gen?

John Suffolk:

We have some departments who are looking to move large numbers of their workforce, upwards of 30,000 people in some cases, back into their homes. It is right from an environmental perspective, it's right from a work-life balance perspective, and it's right from a cultural perspective because it indicates a level of trust that the individuals will keep their end of the contract. And so we basically come up with a different technology paradigm where we're looking for

technology that will allow you to work anywhere, on any device, cheaply and securely. And the answer right now for home working is the thin machine. This device takes your existing home PC, reboots it, thins it out, and in the process removes a lot of security risks, and connects into secure government networks which point you back to your "pc space" at a cost of \$200 per machine, rather than giving them a laptop or a PC at home. We are also watching with immense interest the Negreonte \$100 laptop project as a means of making this happen.

We want this level of ubiquity across the public sector, and across our communities. It may allow us to fix the digital divide, the social divide, and address issues of sustainability along with them.

PART 3: GOVERNMENT 2.0 AND PRIVACY AND SECURITY**Anthony Williams:**

Can you reflect on the security and privacy issues that accompany some of the transformations we have been discussing, and in particular, the UK's responses to these challenges?

John Suffolk:

They're absolutely intertwined. From a privacy perspective the question that I always ask is, "If you take an integrated public sector where you have hundreds if not thousands of infrastructures, can you actually assure the citizens that their data, when it's travelling across these infrastructures, is safe, secure and reliable?"

And the answer is "no."

So if you want to go down the data security, privacy route which of course we all do, not to mention have to, then you need to focus incessantly on the information assurance world, just as we do the government world.

But the problem with the current IT industry model is that when we find a security issue we tend to test the patch out and then deploy it. Well, that's fine but it

could take people a month, three months, six months, nine months to test that patch out. Your security flaw is outstanding during that process. The answer is to deploy first, test second. That represents a fundamental shift from a security perspective, and from an IT industry perspective.

So what is happening is that as we join things up and data sharing comes into the fore, from a civil liberties perspective you have to increase your abilities in information assurance and security. You have to be able to answer yes to the question, “Is my data secure?” and in a loosely federated world this means establishing a minimum set of standards and qualities that people have to be accredited to. Across the UK Government we have stringent security testing of our interconnected systems. But in a broader sense this will be the next big battleground for the IT industry.

Anthony Williams:

Privacy remains a very tough challenge as governments seek to increase integration across departments as that necessarily entails sharing more data. How are you addressing this challenge?

John Suffolk:

If you want joined up services, if you want integration across government agencies, this increasingly means sharing data about citizens. What we’ve found in the UK, however, is that citizens believe that we share more data than we do in reality. They think we’re more joined up than we actually are. Secondly, I think people do worry immensely, and rightly so, about identity theft. Thirdly, there is mass confusion on a worldwide basis on what everyone means by data sharing. Our definition is the minimum amount of data we need about you in order to understand that you are who you say you are, which often amounts to names, address, date of birth, etc.

It is not your health record, it is not your crime record, but when we talk about two words, data sharing, everyone assumes it’s sharing all of your data with everybody. I think we have been sloppy in our language in terms of really explaining to people what we do with citizen data. So you have to navigate a sensitive policy, social and security environment, which we’re still in the process of figuring out.

PART 4: PUBLIC SECTOR INNOVATION

Anthony Williams:

Innovation has always been a challenge for the public administration, in large part because of the low tolerance for risk and failure. Can you reflect on how you’re trying to foster an innovation environment in the UK public sector?

John Suffolk:

Innovation is a very interesting word and most people get hung up over it because they think it’s something different to what they’re doing now. Innovation to us is defined as, “How can we get outcomes for systems, faster and cheaper than we would via the route we would normally take?” If I have an asset in the public sector that we’ve already built, then why would I want to go and build another one which takes time, money and clearly increases the risk. We’re saying: “Reuse what you have.” It’s a cultural shift, not a technology shift, because we already have proven assets to the national scale.

That to me is innovation in a cultural sense, not in a technological sense. It’s quite boring from a technological perspective but by definition it’s an innovation which is reducing your risk and speeding up your service to market. The second thing—and this is where the IT industry gets it wrong—is the industry’s decision to place everything in a vertical product set for health or education or financial services. But the question is whether these products are actually the best for the problem at hand? What if the solutions actually come from the gaming industry? But you would never look at the gaming industry because it’s got the gaming label on it.

And I think because we keep putting labels on things we are inhibiting the innovation that would be possible by taking software that was developed for health care and putting it into the crime space or in the education space. We always think that innovation equates to something that must be invented rather than the belief that innovation is “how do you do things that you would never have done before or thought of doing before.” Often the greatest inventions involve the

smallest changes, yet have provided fundamental breakthroughs.

So if you have enough power and enough data you can solve things in ways you'd never thought possible before. The IT industry's focus on vertical routes, however, too often misses lots and lots of opportunities for innovation. We need to step back, remove the labels, and think analytically and innovatively about the problems we are attempting to solve.

Anthony Williams:

How do you define your role as the UK's CIO and how are you fostering leadership for change?

John Suffolk:

As for my role, or the general role of the public sector CIO, the one common thread across all jurisdictions is that we all say, "I have neither money, nor resources nor power." And I think that this is a perfect model. Why? Because you make progress when you have a compelling argument. In a loosely federated world, which governments are, you can't tell people what to do, you can't use traditional ways of running a private sector business. Therefore you make progress on the basis that it's the right thing to do.

My CIO's say to me, "John, we don't do things because you tell us, we do things because they're the right things to do." This drives a level of analysis of sophistication, and the creation of compelling visions and new ways to deliver those visions that you wouldn't necessarily get in the private sector where decisions are mandated and imposed. When you begin to create compelling visions and people are doing things because it's the right thing to do you get automatic traction.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS



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Anthony D. Williams is the co-author with Don Tapscott of *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* (Portfolio 2007) and is vice president, Government 2.0 at New Paradigm. He holds a master's degree in research and political science from the London School of Economics and is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Government.



JOHN SUFFOLK

John Suffolk was appointed the United Kingdom government's CIO in June 2006. John will lead the work of the CIO Council in delivering the government's strategy for the transformation of public services enabled by technology. Previously John served as the director general of Criminal Justice IT. He has a background of over 25 years' experience in both private and public sector IT and major transformation programmes.



WHITE PAPER

This report is an analysis of a Big Idea, presented as part of New Paradigm's Government 2.0: Wikinomics, Government and Democracy Program. The program, sponsored by leading government agencies and private companies such as yours, identifies and analyzes emerging opportunities to harness new models of collaboration to transform the public sector.

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