

Tennessee Governor Phil Bredesen Uses Technology To Transform State Government

Government Technology
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Nashville, Tenn., might be the nation's country music capital, but it's all business in the statehouse, where Gov. Phil Bredesen has resided since 2002. Bredesen draws on his experience as a computer programmer and health-care executive as he leads the nation's 16th most-populous state.

Bredesen said his goal is to modernize how state operations run - and that includes information technology. "My priorities have been twofold," he told Government Technology magazine. "I want to leave behind better internal systems than the ones I found when I became governor. Second, I want to keep exploring how we use IT to deliver services to the outside world. That's a little more complex than putting up another Web page."

Re-elected in 2006 in a landslide victory, Bredesen has made education a priority, boosting teachers' pay and expanding the state's pre-kindergarten program, while also trying to raise high-school graduation rates. Other priorities for Bredesen - who was Nashville's mayor from 1991 to 1999 - include increasing the number of jobs in the state, enhancing government transparency and improving health care.

While the governor sticks to the big picture when it comes to IT, he's quite comfortable with the subject matter. After working as a computer programmer, Bredesen launched his own IT firm between stints as mayor and governor. In 1980, he founded HealthAmerica Corp., a health-care management firm.

He recognizes both the potential and challenge that comes with trying to use IT to deliver something as complex as government services. As a former businessman, he understands the value that technology brings to improving the business process; at the same time, he realizes there's a cost to IT and it must be viewed as a tool - not a panacea.

Governing IT at Three Levels

Bredesen sees three primary roles for IT in his state: simplifying state operations, improving service delivery and boosting economic development.

For instance, Tennessee used IT to reduce complexity and improve the performance of its Medicaid system. “We offer a huge array of services. Those are all areas where IT cannot only save the state money, but also allow us to better serve the public,” he said.

When Bredesen became governor in 2002, the state’s Medicaid program, known as TennCare, was in deep financial trouble. To help turn it around, the governor used IT to improve core business functions. The state completely overhauled TennCare’s management information system, allowing it to take advantage of new programs and service delivery methods. As a result, TennCare turned the corner. What once was complex, hard to run and a magnet for bad press is now a “much quieter, more invisible piece” of government operations, according to Bredesen.

Another example of IT’s potential to streamline complex operations is Tennessee’s enterprise resource planning (ERP) initiative, nicknamed Project Edison. The \$150 million implementation will simplify everything from state purchasing and human resources to financials and accounting. “Project Edison is also an opportunity for us to relook at other processes and workflows in the state, and will ultimately lead us to make changes in the law itself to recognize the different world of 2008 from when a lot of this stuff was first put together,” explained Bredesen.

In addition, the governor is using the state’s Web portal - ranked best in its class in 2005 by the Center for Digital Government - to bring more state functions online. Services available on Tennessee.gov range from hunting and fishing licenses to insurance applications for the state’s new health-care program for the uninsured. What’s important, according to Bredesen, is keeping the site current. “The Web site is a dynamic thing we have to keep up to date. When new things happen, we have to make sure we can incorporate them.”

Removing Barriers

Broadband Internet access will be a vital ingredient in Tennessee’s economic growth, Bredesen said. “We want to make sure the technology infrastructure is present in the state in the form of broadband. IT at that level allows us to recruit technologically oriented companies.”

But government should have a limited role in pushing broadband infrastructure in the state, according to the governor. First and foremost, neither the state nor localities should be in the broadband provider business, he said. “When I was mayor of Nashville, I never had an interest in [providing] citywide wireless. I don’t think we could do that particularly well, and we would always be behind the times.”

Instead, government should concentrate on removing legal barriers that hinder broadband growth and provide targeted subsidies or tax incentives to encourage private-sector growth.

The challenge is encouraging the private sector to build broadband in all segments of society, eliminating the disparity between Internet-rich suburbs and the broadband-poor inner cities and rural areas, including schools. Bredesen spoke philosophically about the old divide between communities that had four-lane roads and those that did not. Now, it's all about reaching communities with broadband - the informational roads of today.

When it comes to broadband and education, Bredesen said the state's public higher-education system is well wired. But the state needs to make more progress at the high-school level, especially in the form of distance-learning programs that let schools offer specialized classes for smaller groups of students. "That way, school districts don't have to figure out how to hire a teacher who's an expert in a subject that only interests 14 students," he said. With broadband, those teaching skills can be shared more readily.

Mixed Feelings

Like a growing number of state and local governments, Tennessee is consolidating its many data centers, e-mail servers and storage networks. Beginning in 2006, the state Office for Information Resources embarked on a massive IT consolidation initiative that has virtualized more than 117 servers thus far, with another 128 to go. The IT agency is deploying Oracle's grid computing concept, which allows for server clusters and the use of lower-cost processors. In addition, the state implemented a storage area network for enterprise storage.

Unlike some government CEOs, Bredesen has mixed feelings about using outsourcing to solve the persistent need for new and up-to-date technology. For instance, Tennessee opted not to outsource IT operations as part of its consolidation initiative because of its experience with TennCare.

"One of our biggest IT systems is our Medicaid program, which is outsourced," he pointed out. Technically the contract is up for bid every five years, but as Bredesen said, the contract and the company running the Medicaid system are both so large, nobody else bids on the contract; the advantage of competition is lost. The benefit of outsourcing, though, is that it lets the state inject expertise that it otherwise might not have into a program.

"Even though my background is as a businessman, I don't view privatization as a panacea. It's one of the tools in the box that has its pluses and minuses," Bredesen explained.

Cast in Stone

Bredesen said his IT policy for the state is grounded in the fundamentals. "We need to get our systems up to date, make sure we have a modern system to run social services, for example," he said. "It's not sexy, but you have to get [the basics] right, and the results will show up in our ability to provide better services."

Beyond simply making the technology work is the bigger issue of changing business processes so the state can maximize the benefit of new technology.

“There are things that are cast in stone here that, if I were a CEO of a company, I could change quickly,” said Bredesen, adding that laws that made perfect sense 40 or 50 years ago no longer apply to the world that exists today. “One of the big challenges is how do you use IT in a more sophisticated way than just automating not very effective processes? I’ve found that to be the biggest challenge.”

The need to update laws and regulations that are out-of-step with the transformative powers of technology isn’t confined to statehouses. It’s a challenge that stretches to Congress, said Bredesen. “Anytime you have a complex system, such as our social programs, with all sorts of silos of information, and funding mechanisms that go along with those silos - it really stifles your ability to transform.”

Given his IT background, the governor’s views on technology are distinctly practical and business-minded. When asked what he would like his IT legacy for the state to be, Bredesen spoke simply: “What I’m trying to do is bring government a little more into the modern era. A piece of that is IT. I’d like to leave a system that is more modern.”