



A Silicon Valley sensibility has overtaken Washington. But can it budge the behemoth federal bureaucracy?

By Jack Moore

In early June, former U.S. Chief Technology Officer Todd Park appeared at the Health and Human Services Department’s annual techie conference in Washington, the wackily named Health Datapalooza. He was seeking new recruits for the White House U.S. Digital Service, an office he says combines the forward-looking ethos of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency and the altruistic mission of the Peace Corps with the targeted aggressiveness of Navy SEAL Team Six. The group’s mandate? To radically rethink the way the government buys, builds and delivers IT systems and citizen-facing services—with the necessary top cover from the administration to do so.

You don’t even need to learn how government works, Park, now a presidential adviser and tech recruiter, pitched the crowd. “Do what you would do in the private sector and we’ll blow up the barriers in the way,” he said.

Increasingly, officials say what ails the federal government when it comes to IT—a Byzantine contracting structure, antiquated technology and ineffectual engineering processes, all thrown into high relief during the HealthCare.gov fiasco—can be solved by hordes of fresh talent schooled in the fail-fast, agile mind-set pioneered in Silicon Valley. High-caliber talent has heeded the call, swooping into government for “tours of duty” with both USDS and a sister effort launched by the General Services Administration called 18F.



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TODD PARK, FORMER U.S. CTO

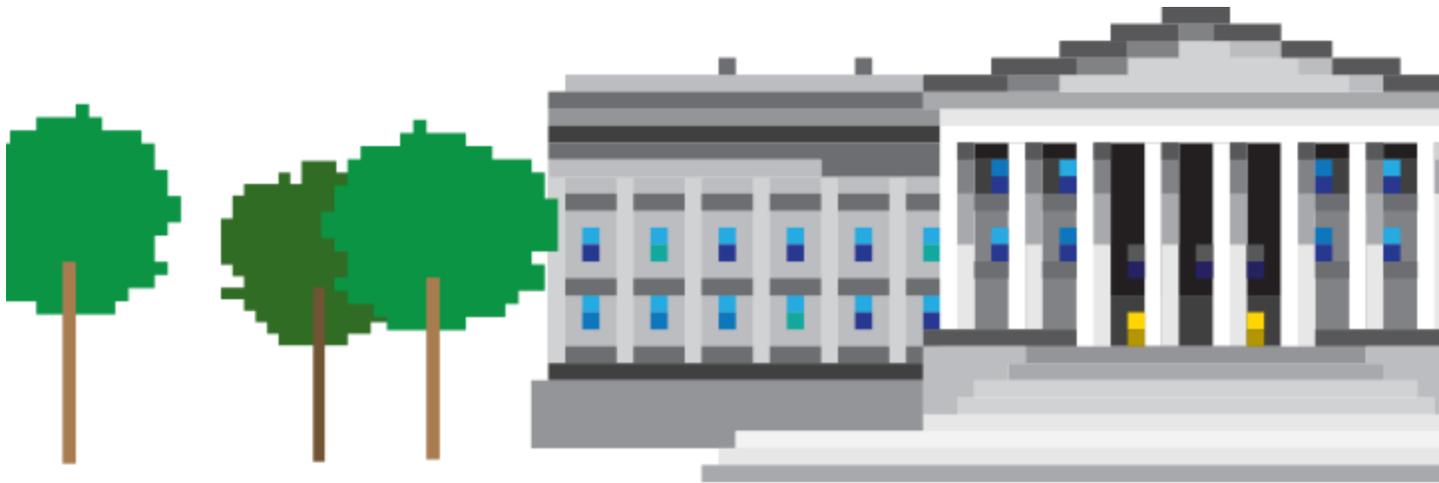


“The artificial barrier that has kept the technology industry and the public sector separated on different evolutionary paths is porous right now, and if enough people cross over, it can be destroyed,” said Mikey Dickerson, the head of USDS, in March at the South by Southwest Interactive Festival in Austin, Texas. Dickerson, a former Google engineer who played a lead role in the HealthCare.gov patch-up, was asked by the president in August 2014 to set up the White House tech unit.

Still, it remains to be seen how this new crop of innovative outsiders will fare in the federal bureaucracy. *Government Executive* spoke with outside experts, agency officials and some of the leaders of the new digital squads, including at GSA’s 18F team, to get a sense of the scope of the efforts and their long-term plans. The White House Office of Management and Budget, however, declined to make Dickerson, Park or any members of USDS available for interviews for this article despite repeated requests.

Silicon Valley, so the cliché goes, is ruled by the mantra of what Harvard Business School sage Clayton Christensen calls “disruptive innovation.” Upstarts tackle ambitious projects even if they might fail, overthrow the complacent status quo, squeeze out the competition by any means and “break stuff” to foster breakthroughs.

It’s unclear whether such a mantra can be adapted into a message risk-averse Washington can rally around, or whether that’s even the right message at all. Quietly, some officials wonder whether there’s already too much of a Google influence in government. With the clock running out on the Obama administration, they wonder whether the new digital teams can recode the “break stuff” mentality into a “fix stuff” mission that actually makes lasting changes.



'THERE'S NO MAGIC'

To begin to find out, we paid a visit to 18F, which aims to carve out new pockets of innovation one interagency agreement at a time. The team's name references the intersecting cross streets at the leafy corner where GSA's neoclassical headquarters sits, just a few blocks from the White House.

"We get questions a lot," says Phaedra Chrousos, GSA's associate administrator for Citizen Services and Innovative Technologies, which oversees the 18F team. "18F is new, and so by government standards we're like crazy and weird." She adds, "There's no magic to it; it's just new stuff."

The team, created in March 2014, is staffed by a growing cadre of engineers, designers and developers who work on projects at agencies' request on a fee-for-service basis. The team has tackled a dozen projects so far, including MyUSA, a single sign-on for government services; a redesigned Peace Corps website; and a handful of market research tools to help GSA contracting officers optimally price professional services contracts. "The need in government is endless," Chrousos says. Some 100 project requests are sitting in the intake pipeline, she adds.

18F is distinguished by the unorthodox methods it champions. There's agile development, which describes the process of tackling large projects by peeling off smaller pieces. The team is also big on user-centered or human-centered design, which prioritizes design choices and functionality based on how people will use a website or widget, not on what's convenient for back-end developers.

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It's a huge open door to the rest of government to say, 'OK, there was a first mover; it all went well. Let's try it, too.'

PHAEDRA CHROUSOS, GSA



The team uses free and open source software and publishes the code developed as part of a project. The use of public code-sharing repository GitHub—which can provide sneak peeks into the projects 18F is tinkering on—spurred a recent headline on the data-driven news site *FiveThirtyEight*: “Some Washington Bureaucrats Are Adopting the Tech Tools of Silicon Valley.”

“This is where I see 18F being a first mover, because I feel like a lot of agencies—I don’t have specifics—would probably say, ‘Oh, I don’t know if I want to put my code in the open,’ and ‘Is this legal?’ ” Chrousos says. “By having someone in the government do it first and not get in trouble for it and actually see that it works to your advantage—it’s a huge open door to the rest of government to say, ‘OK, there was a first mover; it all went well. Let’s try it, too.’ ”

Chrousos has described the team in the past as “surge support for CIO offices.” Agencies request support, hash out the terms and conditions with 18F, and the work is completed by interagency agreements. 18F is required to be self-funding. In contrast to the openness the team espouses in other aspects of its work, 18F officials don’t discuss their rates or pricing structure publicly. The rates the team charges cover employee salaries and typical GSA overhead, such as rent, an 18F spokesman told *Government Executive*.

Meanwhile, the civic hackers at 18F spun off a new line of business, 18F Consulting (the original team is now 18F Delivery), in September to help agencies rewrite solicitations to attract a different breed of vendor. Aaron Snow, 18F's acting executive director, says that's the key to scaling 18F's methods to the broader federal government.

Still, largely outside the scope of 18F's efforts are those multimillion-dollar legacy investments and "big bang" overhauls of legacy technology that have too often imploded on launch after years of meticulous and costly development under traditional Washington contracting methods. Of the nearly \$80 billion in federal IT spending, more than 75 percent is budgeted for maintaining legacy systems.

Those are often the kinds of too-big-to-succeed IT projects cited by the Government Accountability Office. For the first time last winter, the watchdog added information technology acquisition to its high-profile list of "high-risk" federal programs.



**75% of federal
IT spending is budgeted
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THE FIXERS

That's where the other digital squad making waves in government is supposed to come in. USDS, located just a few blocks away at the White House, is populated by the same type of civic-minded techies as 18F, but the mandate is different.

"The basic theory of the U.S. Digital Service is to replicate the ingredients that were successful in turning around HealthCare.gov for a few other high-priority projects," USDS' Dickerson explained in March at SXSW.

In other words, 18F is a team of builders while USDS has fixers.

In the past, Dickerson, like Todd Park, has described the tech unit as the "Navy SEALs" of federal IT. "When there's a problem, they go to the problem without preconditions, without stopping to consider whether this mission's too hard or whether it can't be done," he said last summer at a White House management meeting, shortly after being named to lead the office.

Another key difference between 18F and USDS? The GSA team is voluble about the work it does, with members frequently blogging about the projects they work on and the methods they use. Dickerson's team is far more circumspect. Because no members of USDS were made available for interviews, we've relied on public speeches and statements to patch together a portrait of the team and how it operates.

So far, the digital service concept has been piloted at a handful of agencies. A team at the Veterans Affairs Department is working on collapsing more than a dozen VA websites into a single portal. It's part of the department's "MyVA" initiative, which aims to serve veterans more effectively following the 2014 scandal over falsified data about the length of time some veterans waited for medical care.

Another VA pilot project involved launching a new website to make it easier for transitioning service members to search for civilian careers. VA had originally expected to spend \$25 million over the course of several years to develop the site, OMB Director Shaun Donovan told Congress this spring, but instead, three digital experts from USDS spent three months and just \$175,000 to launch it.

\$25m VA's cost estimate to develop a career website for vets
\$175k amount the U.S. Digital Service spent to launch VA's career site



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if you come here with a big attitude, saying, 'You people are stupid, get out of the way and we'll show you how it's done.'

MIKEY DICKERSON, USDS



At U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, a USDS pilot project worked behind the scenes to make a handful of key fixes to an ambitious plan to digitize the immigration process. As of May, immigrants can now renew their green cards online. Still, the process to fully computerize what is mostly a pen-and-paper process remains ongoing, having

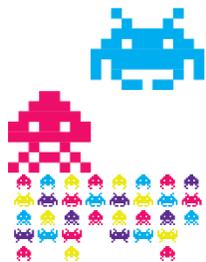
ballooned in cost from half a million dollars to more than \$2.6 billion during the last half dozen years.

The digital service effort is about to hit overdrive. In his 2016 budget, President Obama included the idea of embedding individual digital service teams—staffed with coders, engineers and other federal IT fixers—directly into agencies across government.

The White House has identified some 60 projects that need attention from digital experts. Among them: the Homeland Security Department’s Einstein intrusion-detection system and another governmentwide cyber-monitoring platform, both of which have come under scrutiny for failing to immediately detect the massive breach of employee records at the Office of Personnel Management; and a Census Bureau initiative to use the Internet to modernize the 2020 head count, which is already causing planning headaches for Census strategists.

Most agency teams are still in the planning stages. Greg Godbout, the former executive director of 18F, left GSA in April to help stand up the Environmental Protection Agency’s digital team. He says he thinks of the 20 or so planned agency digital teams as different “franchises,” each taking a slightly different approach based on the needs and missions of their agencies.

“And you will get—and you should—slightly different flavors at each one,” he says. “Some will build a development team. Some will build consulting services . . . And I hope we try umpteen different ways because that’s the advantage of doing open innovation—we can learn from each other.”



WANTED: CIVIC-MINDED TECHIES

The Obama administration has made attempts in the past to refresh government’s tech talent. Since 2012, the Presidential Innovation Fellows program, has brought in dozens of “badass innovators,” (Todd Park’s term) to work on high-concept agency projects. But the

launch of 18F and USDS last year (both staffed by a slate of former innovation fellows) represent more permanent hacks of the hiring process.

“Convincing people to actually come into government is a little bit crazy,” Haley Van Dyck, one of the co-founders of USDS, said at the Personal Democracy Forum conference in New York in early June. “As everybody here knows, we don’t have a ton of perks that we get to offer inside government: Our salaries are pretty capped; it’s hard to compete with the micro-kitchens and the free dry cleaning at Google and whatnot.”

But against all the odds, it’s working, she said, ticking off the tech giants her team has successfully “poached” from Facebook, Google and Amazon, among others. *VentureBeat*, a news site covering the tech industry, even went so far as to list the federal government as one of three “unlikely industries innovating in tech hiring.”

The administration is pitching civic-minded techies seeking purpose, not just perks—“impact junkies” in the words of 18F’s Snow.



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HALEY VAN DYCK, USDS



“America needs you!” Park exhorted a Mountain View crowd last summer. “Not a year from now! But Right. The. Fuck. Now.” (Punctuation comes by way of *Wired*, which covered one of Park’s recruiting trips last summer at the headquarters of Internet giant Mozilla).

Behind that altruistic call, the Obama administration also has pared back some of the more onerous limitations of the convoluted federal hiring process to make it easier to recruit digital talent.

In May, OPM approved Schedule A hiring authority for all executive branch agencies, allowing them to hire “digital services experts” at the upper reaches of the General Schedule pay scale (GS-11 through GS-15) in temporary, one-year positions that sunset after two years. The authority permits agencies to recruit for positions outside USAJobs.gov, the federal government’s notoriously clunky career site.

The effort to hack the hiring process has proved surprisingly successful. The administration hadn’t originally planned on scaling that fast-track hiring authority governmentwide until 2017. Recruiting by the White House team since January has already netted some 2,000 resumes.

2,000 resumes netted by U.S. Digital Service recruiting efforts since January



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HALEY VAN DYCK, USDS

Still, some critics contend the new digital hiring flexibilities are only window dressing on a much bigger problem. Elaine Kamarck, who managed the Clinton administration’s “reinventing government” initiative in the 1990s, argues broader reforms are needed to fix the antiquated civil service system to make it a competitive tech employer. Without that, “they’re gonna fail,” she told *Politico* in a May 19 article titled “Barack Obama’s Tech Troops.”

What makes her so sure? “Because the problem is the structure of the civil service itself,” she says. To be able to compete for tech talent over the long haul, the government needs to make permanent reforms to federal hiring, tighten up timelines in the security clearance process and modernize the pay scale, Kamarck says.

“We don’t need any demo projects to prove that the government needs to up its digital talent,” she says. “What we need is civil service reform.” Kamarck pointed to DHS’ long-standing efforts to attract top-notch cybersecurity talent. Congress has granted the agency hiring flexibilities for years and thrown more money at the agency, and still “they can’t hire them,” she says.

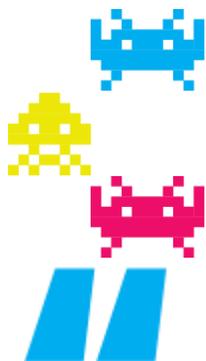
The short-term aspect of new digital hires is also a problem, Kamarck argues. “How many organizations take seriously somebody who’s there on a six-month stint? They don’t,” she says. “The government needs real jobs: People with high skills who stay around, learn the legacy systems and can actually fix things.”

There’s also the question of whether the federal IT workforce is ready for an invasion of innovative outsiders.

IT staff in the federal government are already a less than completely satisfied bunch. Among other mission-critical occupations in government—the designation also encompasses economists, HR specialists and auditors—IT specialists have the lowest employee satisfaction scores, according to the most recent Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey.

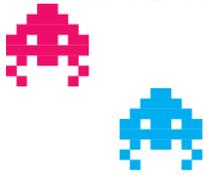
Meanwhile, the recruiting pitch taken up by leaders of the new digital teams often seems to play up how backward government is. “A lot of people in government are, like, suspended in amber,” Park said in one of his first West Coast recruiting pitches for the Digital Service, quoted in *Wired*. That kind of arrogance may resonate in Silicon Valley, but it doesn’t do much to endear the administration’s efforts within some of the agencies they purportedly are trying to help.

The leaders of the new digital offices in government “need to become savvier about the customers they’re dealing with,” says Rick Parrish, who tracks tech initiatives in both government and the private sector for Forrester Research. “Actually take more time to walk in their shoes and understand that sometimes there is actually a reason for why things are done the way they’re done—other than inertia or stupidity,” he says.



Make it possible for people who have been part of the problem in the past to change.

MIKEY DICKERSON, USDS



Federal officials say they're alert to the possibility of a culture clash, especially as plans to embed new digital teams in agencies picks up pace.

"I think it's one of the trickier things that we have to do," federal Chief Information Officer Tony Scott says of the need to balance the talent influx. "I think there is a danger... that if we do it the wrong way, there'll be the haves and the have-nots and you end up with a war."

Scott isn't alone. "We are very concerned about this conflict," VA CIO Stephen Warren said at a government IT conference in May. The aim, Warren said later, is to avoid "management by seagull," where digital newcomers "come in, you make a lot of noise, you crap all over the place and you leave."

Still, Dickerson is known for championing a peacemaker role. He made it a point to empower rank-and-file employees when he was initially hauled in to help HealthCare.gov, according to accounts of his work there. "You have to make it as easy as you can, and at least make it possible for people who have been part of the problem in the past to change," he said in May at the "Velocity" Web conference in Santa Clara, California.

And in a June interview with *Fast Company*, Dickerson downplayed the idea of Silicon Valley disruptors invading government to impose a new order. "It will not work, and you will not go far, if you come here with a big attitude, saying, 'You people are stupid, get out of the way and we'll show you how it's done,'" he said.

WHERE'S THE MONEY?

There's another constituency the new digital teams have to impress: Congress.

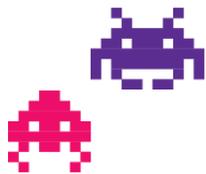
18F is funded by fees from the agencies it works with, which insulates it from the whims of Capitol Hill budgeters. The White House and agency digital service teams, however, require Congress to loosen the purse strings enough to support the effort.

And so far, that isn't happening.

The White House’s \$105 million plan to embed digital teams at the agency level—a pittance compared with the \$80 billion in total federal IT spending—has so far been snubbed by the Republican-controlled House. In all of the 2016 funding bills taken up by the House Appropriations Committee as of mid-June, lawmakers had nixed agencies’ funding requests to support the new teams.

Part of the problem is that despite selling the idea of an “improbable public-interest startup,” to some media organizations and at tech conferences, Dickerson’s team isn’t doing much of a show-and-tell for Congress or even agencies themselves. A survey by Government Business Council, Government Executive Media Group’s research arm, found that nearly 70 percent of federal officials were “not at all familiar” with USDS.

A knowledgeable congressional staffer describes Dickerson’s team as “a lot more opaque,” than his 18F counterparts.



~70% **percentage of federal officials surveyed who were "not at all familiar" with USDS**



The government needs real jobs: People with high skills who **stay around, learn the legacy systems and can actually fix things.**

ELAINE KAMARK, FORMER REINVENTING GOVERNMENT LEADER

“The way USDS has been described to us is that they’re going to be like a fire brigade, where they can go into an agency where an IT investment might be troubled and basically take control over it,” the staffer said. “They’ve been given a lot of power, and it remains unclear what they’re going to do with that. They’ve been hiring all this tech talent, but we haven’t seen anything from them yet. Basically, we just don’t know what they’re doing.”

Questions also remain over the extent to which the digital initiatives plotted out by the Obama administration in its waning years will last.

“I think in one form or fashion, they’ll stay,” says Bill Eggers, public sector research director for Deloitte. For example, he pointed to the Office of E-Government and Information Technology, the IT policymaking unit within OMB created during the George W. Bush administration. Far from being shuttered during the Obama years, its mandate has actually been expanded. “I think the bigger question is, with the change of administration, do you still continue to get all that talent coming in?” Eggers says.

Megan Smith, the current U.S. chief technology officer, speaking at a Washington tech conference in May, said her team is planning to “reach out to every campaign and make sure that everybody who’s running knows about the work we’re doing” related to the digital teams.

President Obama hopes the work of USDS outlasts his term in office.

“The most important thing we’re doing is building a pipeline, a set of traditions, in which really smart folks from the private sector can come in,” Obama told *Fast Company*, “and hopefully a tradition whereby the president recognizes what a powerful tool that is and is providing them the space to do their thing.” Dickerson, though, seems surprisingly noncommittal about the future of the U.S. Digital Service. He says he’s frustrated by the question of whether and how the efforts will last beyond the end of the Obama administration.

“To my way of thinking, we haven’t really done enough yet to prove that we’re worth institutionalizing,” he told attendees at the Velocity conference in California in May.

“Let’s assume that the next administration is full of people who also want generally for the country to run well,” he added. “Then they will be crazy not to continue doing the kinds of work that we’re doing. But I want the results to prove that out, not a bunch of speeches and press releases and policy statements and executive orders.”



Camille Tuutti contributed to this story.