A FEW THOUGHTS ON OUTGOING STATE CIO PHIL WINDLEY
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At the end of December, Phil Windley will no longer be the Chief Information Officer for the state of Utah.

Windley formally tendered his resignation Dec. 4 following weeks of media scrutiny and varying levels of unease within state government because of allegations about inappropriate hiring practices in the CIO's office and the state's Division of Information Technology Services.

(In case you've been off in Bora Bora for the past six months, the issues stem from salaries awarded to new hires made by the CIO and ITS, many of whom had worked with or for Windley while he was with iMall or Excite@Home, as well as to the appropriateness of contracts awarded to outside consulting firms.)

Although Gov. Mike Leavitt's official statement on the resignation terms Windley "a very talented technology leader and strategist," one cannot help but wonder if the heat in the kitchen got a bit too hot for the governor.

The questions regarding hiring and payment practices notwithstanding, I feel that the state has lost a great resource with Windley's resignation as CIO.

As per Leavitt's instructions two years ago when Windley began his efforts at the helm of the state's IT efforts, many of Utah's state government services are now available online 24/7. (For example, if you haven't avoided the long lines associated with registering a car or truck by going online, you've really done yourself a disservice.)

As outlined by Windley in his resignation letter (www.windley.com/docs/Resignation.pdf), as well as in his statement to the Legislative Auditor General's Office, his other accomplishments as Utah's CIO are not without merit, including:

- implementing a unified look and feel (branding) within all levels of the state's Web site

- creating a single e-directory for state employees

- launching or updating 71 online services within the Utah.gov Web site

- helping Utah receive an "A" grade in technology from "Governing" magazine;

- landing a second-place ranking of friendly e-commerce states from the Progressive Policy Institute; and

- placing seventh among states in performance as a "digital state" from the Center for Digital Government.

Such honors are not given lightly, nor are such results achieved without significant effort or foresight.

For his part, Windley should be applauded for the success he achieved in his short two-year tenure. Likewise, Leavitt should also be praised for his willingness to look to the private sector to bring into public service one as capable as Windley was.

That said, by his own admission on his weblog from last Thursday (12/12/02), Windley was not (nor does he apparently ever expect to be) what would be called a politician.

In fact, in describing one of the challenges he faced as CIO, Windley points to the differences in communicating and working with non-geeks as being one of the greatest.

"Now, let's face it, if you've been selected to be a state CIO the problem you have is you're a geek. Any good CIO is likely more geeky than the general population. I've worked hard to overcome my geekiness and for the most part, I clean up pretty well; but I'm still not very comfortable meeting and building a relationship with 100 people who are hard to get a hold of, don't care about IT, and have their own agenda. Some people are great at it. They make a nice living as lobbyists. I'd just as soon put a nail through my hand. I'm happier writing white papers, talking to the Enterprise Development Group, or trying to optimize desktop management.

"There is no vorpal sword that will slay this Jabberwocky. You must work carefully and continually on talking to individual legislators, understanding how the process works, knowing who can influence this thought or that, and educating as many as will listen on how IT can solve their problems. This will probably consume a large part of your time. Its worth it.

"One of the best pieces of advice I ever got on this topic, although it came too late, is this: whenever you talk to a legislator, make sure you're answering the question that is foremost in their minds: "What's in it for me?" Sometimes with IT, that's a hard thing to do. Particularly if they see IT as being a key part of the Governor's agenda. They might see any IT success as a loss for themselves. I think that's been a large factor in what's happened with IT in Utah over the past year."

In other words, as good as Windley may have been as CIO, his biggest weakness may have been a lack of political savviness that and not recognizing that compromise is the name of the game and that in government, the most important work often happens in back rooms and off the legislative floor.

In my opinion, the big takeaway from this entire mess is that Leavitt will have his hands full in finding a tech- and politically-savvy CIO for the state.

In this time of financial shortfalls up on Capitol Hill, the risk is that continued advancement of technology services within state government will get a short shrift minus a strong CIO at the helm. And that would not be a good thing.