

AOL Government.

March 13, 2012

Management

Women In Federal IT: Bringing Innovation To The Private Sector



By **Judi Hasson**



In honor of Women's History Month, AOL Government highlights women's relatively recent breakthrough in the growing and increasingly crucial world of federal IT. This is the second of a three-part series on women in federal IT that reveals who these leaders are and how they're making a difference.

With 26 years of government experience, Kim Nelson moved to the private sector six years ago, taking her vast public sector knowledge to Microsoft.

Her background proved a perfect fit for a big company looking for help identifying opportunities to solve government problems. Now, as the executive director of e-Government, she fosters company connections with federal and state agencies.

"Any organization will be stronger by having both men and women working side-by-side. I think the balance is what matters. It's building a team that can approach challenges by different vantage points." - Anne Reed

Nelson (pictured above), the former EPA CIO and the first CIO for Pennsylvania's Department of Environmental Protection, is part of a trend of executive IT women who are taking their federal

experience into the private sector. Those skills include the ability to collaborate and navigate the intricacies of government.

And she is an example of how women with federal IT backgrounds can bring fresh ideas to the private sector and guide government innovation, winning big ticket contracts to help the state and federal workforce operate more efficiently.

These women bring a wealth of experience with them, from dealing with tight budgets and tough metrics to navigating a plethora of rules and requirements before a project can see the light of day.

"Many women and men leave government and take the knowledge and the contacts they have and proffer it to help industry figure out better strategies to be successful with the government," said Diana Gowen, senior vice president and general manager of the telecom firm CenturyLink, formerly Qwest Communications that has many federal contracts.

She went on to add: "They were insiders, and they know how the budgeting processing works, they know who is influential."

That's definitely the case for former feds like Nelson.

For more news and insights on innovations at work in government, please sign up for the AOL Gov newsletter. For the quickest updates, like us on Facebook.

"My state and federal experience is an integral reason for my success at Microsoft," Nelson told AOL Government.

Nelson leads a team of nine business development managers and architects that deliver innovative solutions to government. But more than that, Microsoft believes "it is important to have people sitting at the table when decisions are being made that understand the customer's point of view," Nelson said.

Her most important asset: her background in the geospatial arena for state and federal clients.

She was appointed by the Secretary of Interior three years ago to represent Microsoft on the National Geospatial Advisory Committee that is driving a strategy around a National Geospatial Platform.

Her knowledge of how government works helped Microsoft succeed with LiveBallot for Americans casting votes while overseas, including deployed military, to electronically download a ballot, eliminating the time to mail the document from a person's hometown to a foreign location.

Instead, the voter downloads the document from a cloud-based solution, prints it out and mails it to their home state – a classic private-public partnership that works for the voter and for the electoral board.

Nelson is hardly alone in stepping up to the private sector after success in the federal IT world. While no one was willing to point out specific successes in their new homes, former federal women say their skills were finely honed and are highly desirable in the private sector.

Anne Reed, for one, spent 20 years in the federal government, including working for the Navy in financial management and as the first women CIO in government when she took the job at the Agriculture Department in 1997. Reed later transitioned to the private sector.

"Women bring the same thing guys do," Reed told AOL Government, "The knowledge of the field particularly the companies focused on the government space. There's always a need to understand how government operates and how decisions are made."

Reed said this generation of federal IT women are transitioning to the private sector with a wealth of useful information. Some head down the technical path to create solution while others take a management or leadership route.

Reed first worked at EDS after she left the federal space in 2000, then became president and CEO of Acquisition Solutions before starting her own company this year - Anne Reed Consulting – helping her clients build their own companies.

She said women with a federal IT pedigree help make a company succeed by "understanding how to help government solve large thorny problems and how their technologies can be used to do this."

"Any organization will be stronger by having both men and women working side-by-side," Reed added. "I think the balance is what matters. It's building a team that can approach challenges by different vantage points.

However, she adds, "I am delighted to see so many women do so well."

It's not always an easy transition for women donning the corporate hat.

Molly O'Neill, EPA's CIO after Nelson, advises women in new private sector jobs to look around and make sure they have the right skills and talents in their slice of the private sector.

"When you leave the government, some of the value you bring is understanding what the client wants, way they think, the right way to approach the government," said O'Neill , now vice president of CGI's energy and environment sector that helps clients connect with the federal government.

Gowen cautions that many from government have a short half-life of being useful in the private sector. It's important to stay up-to-date with every change.

"Does your usefulness expire," she asked. "That can happen to folks if they don't work hard at staying current and keeping their networks going."

Nelson is an example of being in the enviable position with a job that has few boundaries and a mandate to "grow and innovate."

"Our job is to identify opportunities to solve government problems and then to demonstrate how we can do that in a low-cost way that's easy to implement and repeatable," she said.

Tomorrow: Read about what one agency is doing to attract top-notch women to their talent pool in Part 3 of this series. If you missed it, make sure to check out Part 1.

Women In Federal IT

1 of 6

Anne Reed of ASI Government

