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Viewpoint: Tackling the Knowledge Gap: Best Practices for Government-Industry IT Exchanges

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The shortage of workers with advanced technical knowledge is one of the most pressing issues facing today's technology leaders in both the public and private sectors. Even those technically skilled need depth of understanding and seasoned insights to apply their skills toward optimal business or mission benefit. When considering confidential or classified work, the resource pool becomes even smaller. And while there is a growing domestic focus on STEM education, it will take time for bright young minds to become an active workforce. But rampant cyber threats, mobility, cloud, Big Data and the Internet of Things demand a highly qualified workforce ? now.

Government and Industry need to work smarter, and work together, on tackling this challenge. One great opportunity exists in the model created through DOD's pilot Information Technology Exchange Program (ITEP). Launched in late 2011, ITEP allows for in-depth collaboration between the DOD and private enterprise to share best practices, increase mutual understanding of challenges in their IT environments, and collaborate on approaches to solving them.

There's a particular opportunity for increasing knowledge and enhancing much needed skills in cloud computing, IT consolidation, network services, enterprise architecture design and cyber security.

At Cisco, we've been very fortunate to be an early ITEP participant. Recognizing the innovative opportunity to closely collaborate with DOD and help our country, we nominated a senior level IT executive who was accepted to work on critical programs such as the DoD's data center consolidation initiative and other enterprise-level efforts. The experience is proving to be high value for us as well as our hosts at Defense.

While our participation is still ongoing, we've already learned some

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important lessons about maximizing this unique situation.

Be patient. Working with DOD often requires a security clearance, and the clearance process can take a year or even longer. Industry nominees must be willing to accept the associated scrutiny and comply with federal ethics requirements. The reward of the experience can be well worth the effort. Already-cleared peers on the DOD side will understand the delay, and everyone will have that time to crystallize goals and identify key questions for when the engagement moves forward.

Be objective. There can be no financial angle or other conflicts of interest in ITEP relationships. The engagement must be about the technology, the knowledge exchange, the mission and the work.

Be mutually respectful. Each party has much to learn from the other. ITEP participants on both sides need to have technical as well as emotional maturity.

Stay open minded. Embedding in another organization's environment creates a great opportunity to reframe thinking, overcome silos, and adjust cultural biases that don't serve well.

Adopt an enterprise mindset. Maximize the learning opportunity by exploring large scale or transformative projects like data center consolidation, cloud initiatives or enhanced security infrastructure. For example, given his senior expertise, our executive delegate is able to offer strategic and proven insights on how the DOD's technology organization could address the highly complex enterprise infrastructure issues that are needed to respond to increased client demand for service availability juxtaposed with budget cuts. Such efforts also compliment and support US CIO Steven Van Roekel's Digital Government Strategy, which mandates an information-driven, customer-centric, secure, private and lower cost Federal IT infrastructure.

There are other programs designed for government-industry information exchange, such as the Army's Training with Industry, the Secretary of Defense Corporate Fellows Program (SDCFP), or the Government Data Exchange Program (GIDEP). But ITEP's intense side-by-side model, with engagements ranging from 3 months to a year or more, takes cross-pollination to a deeper level of exploration, learning and teaming toward common goals.

The ITEP pilot authorization is set to expire on Sept 30. We at Cisco believe the program should continue, and that more private sector organizations should get involved. We are optimistic that Congress will understand ITEP's value enough to extend it, and that other corporations will understand the benefits enough to engage in it. Increasing this in-depth sharing will help to transform technical skills into knowledge that is needed to improve the security of our national defense infrastructure, and help the DOD better adapt to the evolving realities of modern war fighting.

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