

HHS is a Major Player in the Move toward Agile Acquisition

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HHS is helping to lead the way toward more agile acquisition of IT. Outgoing HHS CTO, Brian Syvak, recruited Mark Naggar to start the HHS Buyers Club and blaze a trail for more innovative acquisition in the agency. The Buyers Club brings together HHS procurement professionals to discuss and test innovative purchasing ideas.

Naggar used the Digital Services Playbook for the first HHS Buyers Club procurement, redesign of the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation's (ASPE) public and intranet websites. Vendors were only required to submit an eight-page concept paper after which five were chosen to proceed by creating prototypes. This procurement concept allows vendors to show the federal buyer "what they can do" rather than writing about it in a lengthy proposal. Naggar involved all of the stakeholders and significantly shortened the procurement cycle.

In an interview with FedScoop Naggar said, "So often we're focused on getting something awarded and there's not enough attention focused on implementation, which is why we're trying to switch from waterfall to agile."

The waterfall method traditionally used for procurement and development has proven to be time-consuming, costly, and has not delivered what agencies truly need. So often, agencies don't realize they're headed down the wrong path until large sums of money have already been spent on a project. "It's basically, 'Congratulations, you won the award,' they drop the mic and walk out of the room. And in six months you get something and realize it's not what you needed," Naggar told FedScoop. An agile approach dramatically mitigates risk and delivers results faster.

Naggar feels so strongly about government-wide acquisition innovation and reform that he organized a Conference for Innovative Acquisitions in February of this year. The conference was sponsored by the Federal-wide Buyers Club with help from OFPP, the US Digital Service, and GSA and its 18F team. The attendance of over a thousand government employees and contractors showed that Naggar is not alone in his quest to re-invent federal acquisition.

One goal of the innovative acquisition movement is to change the federal government's aversion to risk. Although current procurement methods have been shown to be ineffective, federal procurement officials are trained to be good stewards of taxpayer funds. Failure is not an option. The private sector realized long ago that failure is part of innovation using the adage "fail fast, fail often."

Anne Rung, OFPP administrator and strong supporter of innovative acquisition, said at a recent conference, "We don't tolerate any kind of perceived failure. And people immediately walk away and resort to the old way of doing things."

The President's FY 2016 Budget Request calls for more digital services teams and idea labs modeled after HHS across the federal government. With such strong support from top officials and buy-in from the procurement ranks, we are likely to see increased use of innovative acquisition methods in the coming months and for years to come.