Innovation Stories: People

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## Bryan Sivak – former Chief Technology Officer, Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)

### Background and Scope of Role

Bryan came to HHS in 2012 having served as the Chief Innovation Officer for the State of Maryland, CTO of the District of Columbia, and a founder of software companies InQuira and Electric Knowledge.

### Key Accomplishments

Sivak carried on the work begun by predecessor Todd Park, particularly with the HHS IdeaLab and HHS Ignite. IdeaLab – which works to create a space for employees to pilot, test, and grow innovative ideas from within the department – is aimed at addressing the problems and challenges of internal processes in government. [[crosslink Labs content]] The HHS Ignite Accelerator similarly functions as a way for staff to infuse startup approaches to their problem-solving and improve programs. Innovative ideas are crowdsourced Department staff, and the promising ideas are then funded for pilots through awards. Another key initiative is the entrepreneur-in-residence program, which brings external talent into HHS for a tour-of-duty. [[crosslink tour of duty content EIR case study]]

### How He Led Innovation

Sivak, in part, saw his role as to help “reignite the flame” that initially brought people to work for the government. His goal was to help empower them to instill change and to make them feel valued and freedom again “Many who have been in government for a while feel that they are ‘stuck in a box with the lid closing,’” he observed. This stems from a culture of “no” in some agencies, where most potential solutions are met with reservation and a list of reasons why the problem is impossible to overcome. This attitude is lethal for employee motivation and goes against many people’s intrinsic values (a sense of value, freedom, and skill development). Bryan emphasized changing agency culture and processes concurrently, with the following measures:

* **Realigning incentives.** Organizations needs to be realigned to spark innovation, he argues, as the current incentive system encourages people to follow processes. Straying from the process in an attempt to innovate risks reprimand for not following orders. This can oddly divorce outcomes from accountability; after all, if the project fails, but the individual in charge followed the predetermined procedure, they can disavow responsibility.
* **Help employees feel valued for creativity and performance.** Give credit to high-performing and/or creative employees. Instead of taking credit for the work of their employees, managers should defer successes to them. This incentivizes employees for going above and beyond, and also reflects well on the manager who oversaw their work.

### Why a CINO is Essential

An agency’s agenda can get muddled when external crises take precedence (for example, both Ebola and elements of Latin American migration crisis suddenly sprang to the top of HHS’ priorities). Leadership must respond and deal with these items, which underscores the value of having a senior point person tasked with innovation. Making sure innovation has its own seat at the table helps to spur creative thinking and different solutions, argues Sivak. But it can only work if senior leadership has fundamentally invested in the role and imbued it with authority.

**Read more:** [[Crosslink HHS deep dive]]

**Read More:**[Q&A with HHS CTO Bryan Sivak: Disrupting Government Culture](http://www.healthcareitnews.com/news/qa-hhs-cto-bryan-sivak-disrupting-government-culture)

**Listen:**[Implementing a department-wide innovation strategy](http://govinnovator.com/bryan_sivak/): GovInnovator interview of Bryan Sivak

## Chris Gerdes – Chief Innovation Officer, Department of Transportation (DOT)

### Background and Scope of Role

Appointed as the CINO for the Department of Transportation in 20XX, Dr. Chris Gerdes is a professor of Mechanical Engineering at Stanford University as well as the Director of the Center for Automotive Research at Stanford.

Chris understands his role as Chief Innovation Officer as having 3 primary objectives:

1. Fostering the department’s culture of innovation
2. Reducing the internal barriers to innovation
3. Looking for other ways the department can further support outside innovation

He sees himself as an evangelist for popularizing innovative tools. His day-to-day work focuses on empowering career employees, understanding their struggle points, and helping them to work through them. “People are trying to do things differently and they’re really open to people who can help do that,” he says. “I try to be very high energy and excited about this and about the new ideas. But it’s important that this is not about me; I’m not the chief innovator, but really the chief facilitator of innovation.”

### How He Led Innovation

Gerdes’ experience provides an interesting contrast to several other CINO positions, underscoring that there is no one-size-fits-all prescription. Each appointment needs to be tailored to a department or agency. He lacks his own budget and staff, and sees himself as somewhat outside of the organizational structure – but is adamant that this has helped him be more effective. Because his role is not strongly defined within the organizational hierarchy, he has leeway to go up and down the organization and relies on strongly motivated volunteers to diffuse a more innovation-minded culture. He even sees an upside to not having a budget, noting, “You’re not tracking it, you’re busy creating value.”

For Dr. Gerdes, just getting staff talking about and appreciating new approaches has been a significant step in shifting agency culture – and approaches that may seem trivial can have big impacts. For example, Gerdes began carving out a few minutes in the weekly agency meeting of senior leadership to spotlight staff doing innovative work. He saw that with everyone intently focused on day-to-day demand, there hadn’t been time to celebrate people who were doing things in different ways. When Monday morning meetings began acknowledging and celebrating that new approaches were important and were succeeding, he received very positive feedback that it was changing the narrative.

Two phrases were essential tools for getting things done: “What if?” and “Yes, and.” Chris pushed agency employees to set aside constraints and imagine the solutions. “Everywhere has constraints,” he observed; a useful way forward is to set obstacles aside momentarily. Start envisioning ideal outcomes, and then add the constraints back in. Frequently, perceived constraints are not the same thing as actual constraints. One of the most commonly barriers is the *perception* of legal constraints (whether or not they exist in practice). Saying, “Oh, you need to talk to counsel,” often functions as a conversation-ender and initiative-killer. From there, the idea of a legal obstacle often “takes on urban legend [status], and it grows and it grows until you can’t do anything. […] What I did in a couple of cases was say, ‘Well, okay, I’m going to counsel,’’’ Chris said. He stressed that in his experience, counsel was actually thrilled be engaged and take part in problem-solving conversations.

The concept of “Yes, and” was also brought to bear on perceived obstacles. The goal of “Yes, and” is to consciously think about what somebody is saying, acknowledge that it’s been heard, but deliberately build on top of it instead of rejecting the communication. Asking counsel to apply “Yes, and” may not eliminate actual legal barriers; the answer may be “Yes, and you will go to jail,” but the goal is to keep the conversation active and to explore ways to (legally) accomplish the great idea.

### Ingredients for CINO Success

Chris’ comfort with pedagogy and background in improvisation have been crucial tools in his work. For any CINO, though, he says it’s vital to take an interest in the hands-on details as well as the big picture. “I do feel like that’s really important to be willing to kind of roll up your sleeves and say, Let me help,’ as supposed to, ‘Let me just talk in bullet points,’” Gerdes says: “We are made up of a lot of different agencies here in the Department of Transportation and some of them are much more mature in their thinking than others. The FAA, for instance, their idea generation is pretty good. But what they’re struggling with is, “Now, how do we actually take that first step?” […] Whereas some of the other agencies, the Maritime Administration and Automation, for instance, they’re asking, ‘How do we start to think of ideas? How do we think about possible things that we can do?’”

### Why a CINO is Essential

Innovation can't be an add-on; it has to be core to an agency’s mission, argues Gerdes: “It can't be an "other duty as assigned," or an add-on -- it needs to be somebody's job.” At the same time, he observes, there are numerous people with different titles related to innovation here across DOT. His goal is not to consolidate innovation solely under him, but rather act as a connector and enabler, offering to build a network across stovepiped portfolios and sending the message that he is a resource to help others do their job.

But Gerdes’ “outsider status” has allowed him to push breakthroughs in ways of thinking. “People here are so smart, so dedicated,” he says. “[But] they do get locked into patterns of the ways that things have always been done. What I find is that sometimes just a slight suggestion, a slight reframe, sets people really off and running. A lot of times it may just even be an observation about where the discussion is going, and people are like, ‘Wow, that’s brilliant. You changed our thinking.’” Actually, Chris says, “I didn’t do much. [They] were [already] thinking that way. I just pointed [something] out.”

**Read more:**  [Where Does USDOT Fit in with Innovation?](https://www.transportation.gov/fastlane/innovation-month-here-where-does-usdot-fit) Blog post by Chris Gerdes

**Listen:**  [HHS, DoT making the buzz around innovation a reality](http://federalnewsradio.com/ask-the-cio/2016/07/hhs-dot-making-buzz-around-innovation-reality/) (July 2016 interview)

**Watch:** [Culture of Innovation](https://connectdot.connectsolutions.com/p6e3ao619f2/?launcher=false&fcsContent=true&pbMode=normal) (1 hour webinar led by Dr. Gerdes)

## Ann Mei Chang – CINO and Executive Director, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Global Development Lab

### Background and Scope of Role

Before coming to USAID, Ann Mei Chang spent more than 20 years in Silicon Valley, including serving as Senior Engineering Director at Google for 8 years. There, she led global engineering for Google's mobile applications and services, oversaw 20x growth of Google's mobile business in just three years, and delivered over $1 billion in annualized revenues.

Ann Mei was recruited as the first Executive Director for the Global Development Lab (the Lab). The title of Chief Innovation Officer came later when the office became vacant. The Lab was established in April 2014. Its mission is to apply science, technology, innovation, and partnership to accelerate development impact through two primary pathways:

1. Using open and directed innovation to produce breakthrough development innovations that are sourced, tested, and scaled solutions with proven impact; and
2. Catalyzing the transformation of the development community, opening up development work to anyone with good ideas, creating new and sustaining existing partnerships, applying data and evidence to decision-making, and harnessing advances in science and technology.

### Key Accomplishments

In a short period of time, the Global Development Lab has begun to transform the Agency’s work – through building internal capacity for science, technology, and innovation while deepening the impact of partnerships. In 2014 alone, the Lab leveraged $1 in private funds for every taxpayer dollar spent. From a USAID investment of $8.7 million, over $48 million was leveraged through six partnerships, including from impact investors, high net-worth individuals, and other donors — to support the growth and acceleration of early stage enterprises in developing countries. That same year, the Lab received over 3,700 applications and invested in 362 new solutions to food security, health, climate change, energy, and economic growth challenges that improved the lives of 13.7 million people. USAID’s Grand Challenges for Development received 2,058 applications and funded 86 solutions — a third coming from developing countries. [[Lab Year in Review](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/15396/LYR_final_Web_1112.pdf)]

### How She Leads Innovation

Ann Mei describes the Global Development Lab’s role as leading a three-stage innovation process: Disrupt, develop, and mainstream. Disruption is sourcing new ideas for innovations for tools or approaches that could be transformative. The goal is to test as many things as possible, as quickly as possible, to figure out which are useful. Failure is common and expected at this point. At the develop stage, a subset of early stage successes are identified, and the Lab works with missions and the rest of USAID to apply them to the agency’s most pressing problems – commonly by embedding elements in existing programs. In this stage, the goal is to gather evidence that the innovation can have positive impact on the agency priority. Idea iteration and refinement continues, and eventually the successful and validated concepts are mainstreamed into standard best practices. Chang notes that some innovation teams focus too heavily on the “disrupt” phase; the Lab emphasizes the whole life cycle, to ensure that impactful innovations are integrated into the agency.

Chang believes that “up and coming” new things tend to get over-emphasized when considering innovation: “That’s the flashy part, but not the substance part. It’s much more about culture change, the systems change, and incentive change.” Instead, she says, “What we’re trying to do at the Lab, in this particular space, is really look at how do we change the culture -- the culture of the agency, the systems, the incentives and the mechanisms -- so that we can be more agile, and open, and adoptive and data driven with the result being more cost-effective and sustainable solutions.”

“Often,” Ann Mei observes, “We think of innovation as the *thing* we’re trying to do -- and so we have these hackathons, or this contest, so we can innovate and come up with something that no one has thought it before. But I come from the stance that most of the good ideas that can transform our lives probably have already been thought of somewhere. The question is, how do we create the right systems and culture that will nurture those and help them thrive and become mainstream so that they can have the impact that they can?”

### Why a CINO is Essential

If the agency’s top priority is delivering stronger results for the dollar, Chang argues, innovation is absolutely key to continue to move the needle: “Otherwise, most organizations have a tendency to stick with the lower risk, the incentives are all just stick with the tried-and-true stuff that you won’t get in trouble to do.”

Agency leadership faces so many different pressures, it’s key to have an innovation leader focused on building momentum for innovation and constantly trying to bend the curve in its direction. Even better yet to have a separate innovation team, as USAID does – because it generates more critical mass, bringing together best practices, and helping to evangelize across the organization. “It’s much harder,” she observes, “When people are trying to work in isolation to push the boulder up a hill rather than trying to build it up together with a little bit of critical mass.”

## Matthew Dunne, various roles, Department of Energy (DoE)

### Background and Scope of Role

While not specifically a Chief Innovation Officer, Matthew Dunne played two key innovation leadership roles at the Department of Energy. He was hired from the private sector, with a background in big law firm work doing international business litigation and counseling. He first served as the Acting Chief Counsel for then-nascent ARPA-E (Advanced Research Projects Agency for Energy) from 2010 to 2012. His transformative work in launching ARPA-E and codifying effective processes was recognized both internally by DOE and externally by industry, leading to his recruitment by the Assistant Secretary at Energy Efficient and Renewable Energy (EERE) to lead a comprehensive transformation of EERE.

### Key Accomplishments

He helped successfully launch ARPA-E, functioning (with support of agency leadership) as the acting COO for a startup. There’s no handbook on how to launch an agency, but Matthew oversaw the creation of its organizational structure.

When Dunne came on board, ARPA-E had a small staff and had only been in existence for less than a year; there was no regular annual appropriation, but instead $400 million had been allocated through the Recovery Act. All agency resources were focused on launching the first funding solicitation, and then winnowing approximately 3700 applications to about 30 or so projects that received funding.

As a result of Dunne’s process institution and document template creation, EERE was able to achieve contracting for most awards at a speed of roughly 60 days, which received critical positive reception in industry.

At EERE, Dunne was tasked with transforming agency culture. A lack of up-to-date manuals or documentation had created wide variation in processes within the agency, especially across different field offices. Overseeing the largest voluntary reorganization in EERE's history, Dunne consolidated multiple offices and established clear lines of authority with clear reporting chains. Hundreds of employees were classified with common titles and common job descriptions. The harmonization of the agency reaffirmed its common mission and brought a more coherent set of processes to its work.

### How He Led Innovation

Dunne’s time at ARPA-E focused on business process creation and from-scratch documentation.

*“I had to just dive into the weeds, talk to a large number of people to try to figure what were the things I needed to know about. I didn’t know what I didn’t know. And so I took on myself a lot of the responsibilities,” Dunne said. “Multiple responsibilities were outside the legal realm such as NEPA Compliance Officer, audit liaison, record official, unsolicited proposal coordinator. I just put a lot of hats on my own head. The idea was not to accumulate power, but instead to start out a new process that would be compliant with the key legal provisions but also administratively efficient. We had scarce resources in terms of federal employees and time, frankly, and also a limited budget. […] Once I got the process started up, I would train someone else to take over the job, then I would hand off those hats so that we would continue to have a smoothly running machine.”*

Stepping into EERE, Dunne’s tasking, from the Assistant Secretary, “was to change as much as possible, with a preference towards changing everything as quickly as possible." Managing culture change became an integral of Dunne’s portfolio. Sensing disconnects between executive leadership and staff and between DC headquarters and regional field offices in West Virginia and Colorado, he undertook a comprehensive listening tour with the Assistant Secretary. The listening tour took over 20 sessions; he met with over 800 federal employees and contractors on Colorado, West Virginia and DC. It sourced tremendous insights for how the agency could be functioning more effectively and, crucially, it also built trust and support with career staff.

### Ingredients for CINO Success

Being directly empowered by the Assistant Secretary was critical to his success in transforming the agency. But beyond support from the very top leadership, career SES support is essential, and ideally, a consensus will exist among SES leadership that there are discrete areas for agency improvement. Political appointments inherently have shorter tenures; without career staff buy-in, you'll lose the war even if winning a battle. For instance, to grow a culture of innovation, it’s vital that that SES specifically authorize employees to invest time in deep participation with communities of practice. It’s also critical that political appointees receive extended support and training on government procedures to facilitate effective implementation.

### Biggest Challenges

The thorniest obstacles for culture change pertain to the difficulty in helping to shift HR, IT, legal, and contracting from a culture of compliance and towards the culture of performance. A culture of compliance is characterized by an emphasis on stringent rules and punitive measures. “A culture of compliance constantly emphasizes what the rules are ‘You can't do this, you can't do that; this is prohibited; that's verboten.’” Dunne perceives that the issue is institutional, not individual, noting that training and performance measurement are heavily based on rule adherence; this context can make it difficult to advance novel (but legal) approaches.

For instance, Dunne explains, the FAR (Federal Acquisition Regulations) in actuality provides a degree of latitude and white space for creativity, but a compliance-driven culture has difficulty embracing that flexibility. In a culture of performance, “Sit down with the customer, preferably face-to-face or maybe video conference if you’re geographically dispersed, and say, ‘Explain to me what your mission objective is. Explain to me what you want to accomplish.’ And after their full understanding of what the customer is trying to achieve then you give that customer five different options of how to achieve that.”

“I would tell my customers at ARPA-E or EERE […], “Look, treat me as a travel agent. You explain to me that you want to go to San Francisco, and maybe you want to have a non-stop, but you have to be pathway agnostic; you can’t ask for a non-stop. If I get you to San Francisco by next week, let me choose if I’m going to fly you non-stop, if I’m going to put on a red-eye, if I’m going to fly you to Chicago, or maybe you’ll have three stops on the way. But don’t care about the path by which you get there. [….] All you should care about is that you ended up accomplishing your objective.”

### Why a CINO is Essential

Dunne argues that a CINO or equivalent role is essential, given the existing capacity constraints on both human and financial resources. Many staff find themselves piled with multiple responsibilities on top of their normal duties. Without someone dedicated full-time to working on innovation and pushing it, he believes, it’s difficult to realize effective change.

A CINO can be key for breaking down organizational silos, particularly where agency areas are highly segmented with little interaction. Bell Labs was so successful, Dunne says, because everyone ate lunch together in the same cafeteria. Studies have documented that this small detail – the common daily interaction – was the genesis for so many of the innovative breakthroughs Bell Labs produced. Conversations that cut across silos and create informal relationships are essential for building trust. “Without trust, you can’t have innovation,” Dunne says. “You have to know the people, trust their expert judgment and be able to work together to accomplish the common objective. Without trust, there is a very quick communication; someone will shoot a question and the response is almost always, ‘No, you can’t do that.’ Instead, [with more developed relationships], the response should be, “Okay. I understand your question. Tell me more. Help me understand what you’re trying to do and then I’ll give you some advice over how you can do it maybe a different ways and what you envision.”

**Read More**: [The Quiet Clean Energy Innovation Revolution at the Department of Energy](http://www.forbes.com/sites/matthewstepp/2013/01/07/the-quiet-clean-energy-innovation-revolution-at-the-department-of-energy/%234f48649a6c98)