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CIO JOURNAL

Colin Powell Reminisces About IT Overhaul at the State Department

Finding out-of-date computers back in 2001, then-secretary upgraded hardware and software, but found 'brainware' the toughest to change



Colin Powell speaking Tuesday at the Gartner IT Symposium/Xpo in Orlando, Fla. PHOTO: TOM LOFTUS/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Tom Loftus

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ORLANDO, Fla.—When Colin Powell arrived at the State Department in January 2001 as President George W. Bush’s secretary of state, he found an information-technology system predating the internet. Some departments were still using computers from Wang Laboratories, which went bankrupt in 1992.

He told them, “I am now chief information officer, the secretary of state, and we are going to fix this,” Mr. Powell said onstage Tuesday, addressing attendees at the Gartner IT Symposium/Xpo.

Mr. Powell ordered 44,000 computers—”Don’t ask me how I got the money, because I won’t tell you”—and worked with the Central Intelligence Agency, which handled the State Department’s infrastructure, to double computing capacity.

- **Work in Progress: Tomorrow's Tech Workplace**

Technology work is undergoing a fundamental change likely to require redesigned workplaces that strengthen the partnership between technology and business functions. Key considerations include a flexible workspace and work practices, collaboration tools and processes, and an engaging culture that promotes purpose and meaning.

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“This is not just hardware; I gave them software and now I had to change the brainware,” said Mr. Powell, a retired four-star general and veteran of the Persian Gulf War, Vietnam and the invasion of Panama.

Over his 35 years in the U.S. Army, and during stints as national security adviser to President Reagan and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Presidents Clinton and George H.W. Bush, Mr. Powell has had access to plenty of hardware, much of it deadly. But it's brainware that proved to be the most potent tool in what he sees as a lifetime of leadership-building alliances, both on the world stage and within his own areas of command.

Mr. Powell told the audience of information-technology professionals about lessons he learned on leadership and service, as well as IT.

A command of information technology helped him serve the mission. But face-to-face alliance-building and the occasional glass of vodka with Russian President Vladimir Putin — “a good way to do deals” — was fundamental to his success as a leader.

Mr. Powell made sure to establish his technology bona fides to the audience.

In 1969, after his second tour of Vietnam, Mr. Powell went to graduate school for two years to study computers, despite his C average as an undergraduate. His thesis was about International Business Machines Corp.'s “unbundling” of software and services from hardware sales. “If there is anybody in the room who needs help with Fortran or Cobol, I am your man,” he said.

He watched over the years as the Army evolved into what he described as the “most sophisticated organization on the face of the earth.”

But technology alone doesn't define information systems. Culture and leadership play equally important roles. Mr. Powell described a career dedicated to keeping information lines open, encouraging subordinates to own their expertise and speak out as necessary, even when they disagreed with their superior officers.

At the end of the Cold War, with the Soviet Union dissolving, Mr. Powell, as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, faced the task of reconfiguring the military. The reorganization required cost cuts, and he had to lead branches of the military that didn't always see eye to eye.

"How do you bring diverse teams together?" asked Mr. Powell, who was raised in the South Bronx by Jamaican immigrant parents and learned some Yiddish from Jewish neighbors. His solution: Have the chiefs of staff representing the four military services come in and talk with no assistants and no agenda.

After the collision in April 2001 of a Chinese jet fighter and U.S. Navy intelligence aircraft off the coast of China, Mr. Powell gave his personal phone number to China's foreign minister, with instructions to call him anytime. Mr. Powell said the Chinese couldn't believe that he had provided his personal number.

Another lesson: During a visit to the Oval Office, Mr. Powell, then serving as national security adviser, was telling President Reagan about a problem. The president responded by commenting on the squirrels outside the window.

It took Mr. Powell a trip back to his own office to realize the meaning of the conversation. "What he was saying was 'Colin, I trust you, I have confidence in you...and I trust you in this range of decision-making.'"

"I never forgot that," said Mr. Powell, who has taken the same approach with his own teams. "If the purpose is obvious and they believe in it and if you take care of them...you will have a high-functioning organization."

"I had junior officers nine grades below me....I said you argue back with me. If you don't agree with me, I expect you in that area, to argue with me....March right back in here, tell me I was wrong," he said. "That is what you are paid to do....That what's leadership is all about."