

A photograph of the United States Capitol dome is centered in the background. Overlaid on the dome are several concentric, light blue circles that radiate outwards, creating a ripple effect. The overall color palette is a mix of blues and greys, with a prominent yellow banner for the main title.

**Banish Silos, Start Small, Move Fast:**

# Advice for Federal CIOs

Underwritten by:



Underwritten by:



MeriTalk recently surveyed 12 Federal chief information officers (CIOs) on their top technology priorities for fiscal year 2025, in areas ranging from artificial intelligence (AI) to cybersecurity and cloud. We then conducted in-depth interviews with six CIOs to gather additional insight on the top challenges and opportunities. The resulting report explores agency spending plans, details potential roadblocks, and provides recommendations for Congress and agency officials.

Two longtime Federal IT partners – Eric Trexler, senior vice president of public sector at Palo Alto Networks, and Surya Durvasula, senior vice president and general manager, Dell Technologies, Federal – recently sat down with MeriTalk to discuss the survey findings and provide their own recommendations about where CIOs should focus going forward.

**MeriTalk:** The [Tech Tonic FY25 Federal CIO Forecast](#) shows that the top three technology priorities for CIOs in fiscal 2025 are cybersecurity, workforce transformation, and AI. What is your gut reaction to these priorities, and how do you see them playing out in Federal agencies over the next year?

**Trexler:** Most importantly, we need to break down silos when we are improving cybersecurity. You need identity, and you have to think about risk management and modernization – and you definitely need to ensure that AI applications are secure. But you can't do all of that in silos. If CIOs want to make their own luck, they have to break down walls within agencies, integrate their teams, and focus on security as a business outcome. I think you see all of this reflected in the report.



**MeriTalk:** Suri, let's turn back to AI. While it is a top and growing priority, the survey detected a mix of excitement about AI's potential and anxiety about the role and risks of generative AI (GenAI) in particular. Just 17 percent of CIOs say they regularly use GenAI for work, but 75 percent expect AI to significantly impact government operations over the next five years. What advice can you offer to CIOs seeking to expand AI use and mitigate risks?

**Durvasula:** While it is important to consider risks, we risk falling behind on AI if we don't move forward. We can do a lot now to jump-start that movement. AI education is a great place to start – upskilling the workforce on what AI can do and how it can benefit government operations. Ultimately, we want to better serve citizens – and AI has the power to really help us.

We also need to consider the outcomes we are seeking. Let's define those first before we buy a bunch of technology. We can start small, in pilot form, to get over any anxiety.

**Trexler:** I agree about starting small, but we have to start small and act fast in multiple areas. People are using GenAI already. My kids and their friends are using AI for everything – and they are the workforce of tomorrow. And our adversaries are using it. Our data shows that AI is going to take off at a rate much faster than cloud, virtualization, and even mobile phones. So we have to move faster to keep up.

**MeriTalk:** CIOs were quick to point out how vital infrastructure and application modernization are to their success in higher-priority areas such as cybersecurity, AI, and digital government. How would you assess the Federal government's progress in modernization, and how do those efforts impact other key initiatives?

**Trexler:** There are tremendous opportunities with modernization, but to be successful, we have to look at our priorities – cybersecurity, digital government – hand-in-hand with our challenges, which include budget constraints, staffing gaps, and lingering legacy systems. We can no longer look at them separately.

**Durvasula:** It is not ideal that 75 percent of the government's budget is tied up in operation and maintenance of existing systems. So I agree – if we keep looking at these issues as siloed, we are never going to fully modernize.

**MeriTalk:** CIOs say they have secretary-level support for IT initiatives, especially cybersecurity and digital government. They also say those obstacles you cited remain – budget constraints, staffing gaps, and legacy systems. What advice can you offer CIOs and others in Federal IT to overcome these challenges in order to really start moving in their priority areas?

**Durvasula:** One of the quotes I liked in the survey was from a CIO who said, 'What if we could look at this as a brand-new environment and start from scratch? What would we do?' It's a good exercise. We have to look at our big systems in light of the fact that cybersecurity is much more important than it was 25 years ago. We need to reassess our cyber posture. We need to ask how AI is going to help us produce better outcomes. We need to have these conversations today.

**Trexler:** If you have secretary-level support, you have to move forward. In some respects, the way to modernize is to just do it. It's hard. But let's get a little disruptive. Let's think about what we're trying to do for citizens – and deliver that today.

**MeriTalk:** Please give us your predictions for the year ahead in Federal technology progress and priorities. Where should the focus be, and how can government and the private sector support CIOs and other agency leaders as they move forward?

**Trexler:** Cyber defenses should be a lot of our focus. We keep trying to protect ourselves the way we always did. Requests for proposals ask for specific products – instead, government should ask industry to address its business problems. And we need to simplify. There are too many cybersecurity technologies – dozens and hundreds in some cases – that agencies are trying to integrate. It doesn't work. We have to consolidate them. This is more of a projection than a prediction.

**Durvasula:** Ultimately, moving forward, we have to innovate – especially in cyber and AI to keep up and get ahead of our adversaries. We need to build a truly digital government and improve citizen services in a meaningful way. Breaking down silos is the first step.