



CTO Download: Designing Digital Strategy to Empower Prosperity

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Image: Vaughan, Ontario

By overcoming challenges, mastering data and pursuing continuous innovation through digital strategy, Frank Di Palma, CIO of Vaughan, Ontario, believes IT can empower city government to achieve more.

Frank Di Palma leads Vaughan, Ontario's IT Department with a clear focus of encouraging collaboration between IT and the rest of government as part of overall digital strategy.

The city of Vaughan is one of Canada's fastest growing cities with a population of more than 325,000. Over the last 15 years Vaughan has made investments in enterprise solutions to sustain them through this growth. Di Palma is driving digital strategy to enable the city's ability to prosper.

From your perspective, what is the IT Department's role in government and how do you feel it has evolved over the years?

Di Palma: It's difficult for IT departments in government to evolve for two reasons:

- They serve multiple lines of business at multiple locations, which generally means they have a highly complex IT infrastructure and a large volume of unique business solutions that need to be maintained, secured and made available.
- There will always be more work and opportunities than there are time and resources.

As a result, if projects are poorly selected and stakeholders' expectations are not managed, the perception is that IT is not adding value for their clients. The evolution of IT in government has been predominately influenced from the onset of the digital age. Citizens demand access to intuitive smart services from their city anytime, anyplace on any device, with timely responses and accurate data.

In 2015, Vaughan reorganized so that the CIO reports directly to the city manager and is part of the management team. IT now has a strong voice on project selection, scope of projects and resource planning. This has made it easier to manage expectations and demonstrate value.

A lot of cities are going through this transition. IT departments now:

- Have more say on strategic direction and corporate business planning
- Are expected to understand citizen needs (seeing the citizen as the client vs seeing the internal department that services the citizen as the client)
- Are responsible for creating advisory bodies for business input and better IT governance

- Are expected to champion smarter solutions that utilize data, things and platforms
- Break down silos and focus on a more integrated architecture
- Are expected to bring more tools and technology closer to that which is used by clients at home
- Champion innovation rather than just “keeping the lights on”

IT teams have also evolved to assist with project management maturity.

Formal project management is in demand. What is old hat to most IT departments is gaining a lot of attention as a competency. At Vaughan, we are setting up a Corporate Project Management Office (CPMO) as a Centre of Excellence.

As a technology leader working within the public sector what specific technologies interest you?

Di Palma: How information from sensors can be used in conjunction with data from third party services to automatically adjust physical things (street light, traffic lights, power, sprinklers, medical devices) that assist citizens, administrators, businesses and other organizations in navigating their day-to-day lives.

” I’m fascinated by any technology that makes us safer, healthier, greener and effective while reducing costs.

In Vaughan’s digital strategy you highlight key areas of importance that your municipality should be focused on, are there any specific technologies that Vaughan has adopted as a means to become stronger in some of those areas?

Di Palma: The digital strategy is a vision without constraint. As a city, we have all the required enterprise solutions that have enabled us to sustain tremendous growth over the past fifteen years. What we need to do now is:

- Become smarter: Master our data; understand how data from different sources can be connected and analyzed to solve problems in new ways or take advantage of opportunities that would have otherwise been hidden; create dashboards to manage by exception and transparency
- Encourage economic activity: By being open to new ideas and providing valuable information, tools and technology.

- Enhance our community: Be inclusive, progressive and innovative; leave no one behind.
- Focus on city employees: Empower front-line staff, improve digital literacy, create a culture of continuous innovation without fear of failure.

If you were to press me on specific technology that we should invest in immediately, I would say open data and a citizen relationship management (CRM) solution.

What were some of the major challenges Vaughan faced when attempting to adopt these new technologies?

Di Palma: I believe that the major challenges would fall under any of the following:

- Buy-in: Employees will resist any change to any technology without clearly understanding the anticipated benefits and understand their role in bringing those benefits to fruition.
- Project Management Methodology: Once you have the buy-in, you need to demonstrate what the implementation is and what it's not; that there is a schedule to track; a processes to address risks and deal with issues.
- Culture: You won't be able to deliver any project unless your team is collaborative and communicating effectively.
- Skills & Resources: Your team can gel well, but if you have skill gaps or resources are over-allocated, errors will be made; you'll have a lot of false starts; deliverables will be missed; timelines will be extended and so on.
- Transition to Operations: Operational impacts are sometimes underestimated; lack of documentation and knowledge transfer are insufficient to drive immediate returns on the investment in the technology. This prevents the solution from growing.
- Pace of Technology: Technology is changing at an exponential rate, and business cases for new technology have a short life span. It can be frustrating if it takes too long to get the commitment on implementing the new technology.

What are some of the ways your municipality has overcome challenges when implementing new technologies and what best practices have you established?

Di Palma: The formula for overcoming these challenges is:

1. Don't rush planning; bring all stakeholders to the table and get their commitment
2. Create proper governance and support structure
3. Assemble a dedicated team
4. Make sure team members know their roles
5. Create test environment
6. Deliver larger projects in phases
7. Get clients to test and create or modify existing business processes
8. Plan for a bumpy data migration
9. Prepare your service desk
10. Create service-level agreement with client
11. Blitz support on go-live date
12. Monitor systems for 60 days
13. Celebrate success and acknowledge team
14. Return later to review reporting needs

All too often, clients come to IT departments with a product in mind. Most implementation challenges arise from underestimating the amount of business transformation (people and processes) needed.

Consider business transformation first and the technology – as long as it's mature – will be a breeze.

EfficientGov's CTO Download column highlights the work of civic IT leaders that achieve notable, forward-thinking technical solutions that change the game for their local governments. Who they are, what they believe and their approaches advance cities governing under limited resources.

Civic technology leaders who would like to participate in CTO Download should email editor@efficientgov.com.

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