

EPISODE
03

The moment has come for government CIOs

Guest: Nancy Sieger, Partner, Financial Services, Guidehouse



NANCY SIEGER: I think government technologists need to try it and learn. There is such an opportunity today that didn't exist three years ago to test AI in a safe environment where your data stays within your organization. It doesn't go out. And technologists need to be given the freedom to just try it.

VOICEOVER: Outwitting complexity starts here. Welcome to The GuideLine.

STUART BROWN: Nancy, welcome to GuideLine. I'm thrilled to welcome you to the show and have a chance to discuss really a timely topic, namely experiences that CIOs across the government are currently facing. But before we jump in, I'd like to ask if you can share a little bit about your background with our listeners, which agencies you worked for, and what you focus on now here at Guidehouse.

NANCY SIEGER: Sure. Thank you, Stu. It's nice to be here today. For those of you who haven't met me, I'm Nancy Sieger, a partner at Guidehouse with oversight of the IRS account. Prior to my Guidehouse life, I spent more than 35 years in the federal government. The majority of my career was at the IRS. The last five years of my career at IRS was serving as the Chief Information Officer. I was CIO during Covid, during tax reform, during a time when technology was exploding in government. So, it's kind of cool to see what's going on now.

I spent my last year in government at the Department of Treasury as the Chief Technology Officer, with a focus on AI. That was right after a lot of the executive orders came out previously on AI, and we were trying to set the appropriate guardrails and offer freedom. Today, I get to spend time with my federal colleagues and help them move forward to the future with some of the breaking information in the CIO space.

STUART BROWN: It's an amazing history, Nancy, and I think one very relevant to those that are going to be listening in today because there's so much change happening. Well, there's so much change that happened over your tenure in the government. And now that change seems to be accelerating at even a more rapid pace. And I think, you know, we talk a lot of time, when I'm talking to CIOs within the government, you know, there's sort of a commercial mandate coming into the federal government, which is reinvigorating. Some of that is obviously because we've got to do more with less.

And some of that is also because the technology that's coming at us, it's either adopt or defend against that technology. And I'd like to really get your thoughts on, sort of, that commercial mandate versus the constraints in the government.

There's a clear push, but what's the tension between what the CIOs are being asked to do and what the pace of innovation that's being asked for? What are those challenges you've dealt with before, and what do you think they're dealing with today?

NANCY SIEGER: I think it's the right time for this change in direction for tech and government. It is the right time. You know, move like commercial. I used to always say, you know, in our personal lives, if an update gets pushed to us and it doesn't work, we just expect it to be fixed, like, that day or the next day, right?

Government's expectations are a little different. Our citizens expect flawless execution. I would hope that the tension that existed prior to this redirect in government, hence governance, big "G" governance, where CIOs are responsible but don't necessarily have the authority to deploy tech in a way that will serve mission, hopefully as the new direction emerges, some of those other changes will follow suit.

And, you know, admittedly, government is different. Government has an obligation to the citizens to be transparent. I still think that if CIOs are empowered to go with that responsibility and some of that oversight, or when you're a CIO second guessing, you know, I would hope that that is minimized and that CIOs can do their job and deliver tech in alignment with their missions.

I haven't seen that yet, but I think if we keep it out there in the ecosystem, people will start listening and it will happen.

STUART BROWN: Well, it's funny, I'm starting to see a little bit, but I agree with you. We're not seeing it across the board. I think there's one CIO I'm working with in the government who not only owns the CIO, but also owns the user experience of the you know, and in that case, you're seeing a synergy where the administrator and he are very aligned on what that looks like.

And that's really, you know, I think that's something we saw in the commercial space where CIOs, you know, that a lot of CIOs are becoming Chief Experience Officers, right? Because reality is whether it's the internal technology or whether it's the external facing the organization, it is the experience you're generating really comes from the technology. And I think that's one hopefully we'll see more of it, because I really think, especially from the IRS perspective, it touches everybody and it is a place where there is different levels of engagement depending on how you interact. And I think that's a place where there'd be so much goodwill, I think, as how we interface changes, right?

NANCY SIEGER: Yeah, I agree. And you know, I'll use big IRS as an example. In the big agencies, I think there will be a challenge bringing CIOs closer to experience. It's necessary. I agree with you. Why am I delivering this tech? What am I trying to achieve with it? I'm looking forward to that. I know that over the years, government tried the concept of product managers, which was their attempt to focus on experience.

I do think that that change in work as if you're a commercial CIO, quasi commercial, have a customer experience mindset and go for it with the tech along with your business partners will really show those of us not in government what government's capable of.

STUART BROWN: Yeah, I think that's great. And I don't think people completely get the scale. You know, so I've worked in enterprise tech my entire career, right? I mean, the scale of government is some of the biggest. If they were all independent, each of the agencies would be some of the biggest Fortune 500 companies in the world, right? They're huge organizations and they have very complex legacy technology environments as well as modern technology environments. And it is non-trivial. And I think that's what some people just don't get sometimes with the complexity of these organizations.

NANCY SIEGER: Right. The complexity and the fact that, you know, in the commercial world, a CIO can make a case that, if I do this, I'll generate revenue. In government, if it were that simple, the government wouldn't have legacy. But they don't get funded to eliminate legacy. They get funded to deliver new. Hence such a complex technology ecosystem, I would say across government. IRS may be big, but I don't think that problem is unique to them.

STUART BROWN: Yeah, that makes sense. Well, let's talk about, you mentioned your work with AI before you left the government. And I think obviously now a lot of the conversation we have is around AI and there's promise and there's hype and there's overpromise and there's fear and there's all the things that are out there. And unfortunately, I think there's too much fear out there. But, you know, fear is driving some of the, some of the questions, especially with some of the recent announcements with, with some of the models coming out. But when you really think about AI, like if you put your Chief Experience hat on or your CIO hat or others, when you think about what the promise of AI is, what vision do you paint out there for people that they should take?

NANCY SIEGER: I think that I'll paint a vision for government technologists, and I'll be bold and talk about citizen users, right. Those who are having the experience. I think government technologists need to try it and learn. There is such an opportunity today that didn't exist three years ago to test AI in a safe environment where your data stays within your organization. It doesn't go out. And technologists need to be given the freedom to just try it.

I contend that the true technologists are doing it at home, right? They're not being invited. They think it's cool and they're doing it. You know, my vision or hope for government is that they bring that same entrepreneur philosophy inside to, how can I make my job easier so that I can focus on the hard stuff?

And how can I deliver an experience to the citizen that the citizen might want? And how do we help users of technology to appreciate, you're getting this faster because we used automation. But here's your "out" if automation doesn't work, right? And I do think there's still a level of fear in government in AI. I like to believe that that's because they don't have the time to explore it. Not for any other reason than I haven't had a chance to stop and figure this out and how we can use it.

And you know, we want technology to move fast. We also have to realize that true technologists are always learning. They're always upskilling so that they can do the next thing and not just stay here. And I don't know, Stu. You can probably say this better than I can today. Do we give our technologists that space to have time to grow and evolve and upskill as technology is flying away from us?

STUART BROWN: It's an excellent point. I love that you put it out there that way because true technologists and look, I mean, there are people that want to do their thing and just, you know, and plug and chug and be whatever. But the true technologists want to play and want to get better and want to learn. The reason you went into this business was because you were a learner by nature and an experimenter by nature, and you don't, you know, the only thing that takes that away is if you don't give them tools. I like what you're saying. We need to give those that, frankly, know our systems best and those that like to build the chance to optimize and build. And I think if we do that, what we'll find is we'll get some really good use cases.

And I also think, you know, one, you also have better retention of talent. I think talent wants to feel like they have an opportunity to learn and make things better. And I also think it helps with the messaging. I think when it comes to adoption of AI, you know, I've spoken with many, in the commercial space, many C-suite, board directors, and others around adoption. And I'm like, you talk about AI like it's a tech. And yes, we'll talk about this model or that model or where the data sits. All that's very important and that's really for the technologists to help you with. But it's a change conversation.

And I think that's the part where, you know, there will be people that will be experimenters in the tech space that hopefully will help build that vision, but then we've got to be able to articulate that to the users and get the users excited about it. So, I'd love to get your thought around that, because as someone that was the bridge between the technology side of the business and the business side of the business, how do you think we can do a better job there, especially in the government?

NANCY SIEGER: Invite the business side in to do it, too. I mean, we're talking about tech that you probably don't need an engineering degree to be effective at. Why wouldn't we look outside of traditional technology organizations to those business owners, to think about how they can use these tools and take some work off the plate of the technologists and the technology organization. Invite them in.

You know, we don't want them, invite them in with the right guardrails, right? Don't be telling the CIOs, you know, what models to use, what environments to use. But give those business customers some flexibility that they've always wanted so that they can deliver that change faster. You know, that would be one thing I would explore, how to remind them, those existing guardrails you have today are probably good enough.

Don't do all those things that we know cause risk to your environment, but let non-IT professionals take on some of that intriguing tech that's being put in front of all of us now.

STUART BROWN: I think that's great. And you know we had this promise over the years of the citizen developer. But the reality was the citizen developer in the past was still clunky. It was conceptually there, but still relatively clunky. But with the AI tools we have now, we can actually have citizen developers. I'm an analogy guy. So, I always like those. I'll use an analogy. It's like, they're the, you know, we're bringing ingredients to their kitchen and they're the chefs. They know their customers, they know their patterns, they know their street, they know their menu.

And so, we're bringing them things that, they may be able to put this spice in their new dish, or they may be able to make a new dish. And that's the part when you just see the magic happen. And I think that's true citizen development in a lot of ways. And I think to your point, it democratizes technology in a way that we've never had before. I've never loved the term low-code-no-code because I always thought that was almost too techie. It's, citizen development to me is, it's like you just, you know it when you know it. And I agree with you, I think it's a great way to go.

NANCY SIEGER: And that's our future, right? And Stu, two years from now, people are going to look at you and I and say, citizen developer? This is just how I do my job. Right? And that's where we want tech to be. We want tech to be available to all and have certain tech available to the engineers, because you need that engineering discipline and other tech available to all who are trying to drive that customer experience.

STUART BROWN: Yeah, yeah. It's funny, I was watching a podcast the other day, one of the AI podcasts, and they were talking about how, you know, they were meeting with some customers and they were going to go back and meet with the, they wanted to meet with the next level the next time they went back, and their AI, and they were using OpenClaw. But their AI was like, would you like me to build you a CRM to manage that? And it's like, yeah. And it's like, you don't think about, like, it just builds a CRM to manage that interface. You didn't need to buy a CRM package because it was, like, solving a point problem in a very simple way without all the clunkiness. You can do that with tooling, where you're staying within the guardrails.

To your point, I love what you said about the guardrails, because I think this is the part that everybody freaks out about. They're like, we got to put, everything needs these guardrails. No, as long as you've walled off the fence, the kids can play. You know what I mean? I mean that in the nicest way, right? You're not going to, you know, if they touch the fence we'll know. But, and this is where the enterprise really becomes interesting.

NANCY SIEGER: Right. And as long as you build that fence, your kids will be safe, right?

STUART BROWN: Exactly. Exactly.

NANCY SIEGER: That's what people need to understand. You know, I used to say, go try to break it then. Let's see if you can break it. Isn't that, you know, where we should put the tools out there? And you and I both know this move to platform. Just about every platform comes with their set of tools. So, you don't even have to go acquire something else. You have to have help guiding you through the skills part. The tools are there.

STUART BROWN: There's so much untapped value in the tools we already have, which, you know, I've never had my more fun in my career than when I've worked with CIOs to untap existing spend and when they deliver that value to the business or the client's, like, where did you get the budget for this? Like, no, we already had these. We just assembled them in a different way. We made a new recipe, and it's now number one on the menu, it's the special every day.

NANCY SIEGER: I think one of the biggest government breakthroughs was tooling in the cloud.

STUART BROWN: Yeah.

NANCY SIEGER: What you know, now that you're in the cloud, what you can do without having to pull in acquisitions, pull in, you know, the hardware folks. It's right there.

STUART BROWN: Let's talk about talent for a minute. Because we talked about the experimenters. We talked about the business. You know, obviously in the federal government a couple of things are a challenge. Number one is obviously we've had a refresh of talent in the last year or so. So, we've had some tenured talent that is now retired, and we've got other talent that is, you know, we need new talent in the government. And how do we rebuild, how do we attract the talent you were talking about, which is the experimenters? Or some of the best, because, you know, the best tech talent in the world, they don't always think government first. I'm wondering, how do we get them excited about that? How do we get, what do we look for?

NANCY SIEGER: I think government and you know, with all this opportunity being put in front of CIOs today to work more commercial oriented, we first of all do the very basic things. You know, some people are going to start chuckling when they hear me say this in the podcast. Don't bring people in and put them in a cube. Change the way people work. You know, government is excited about having people come back to the office. Yay! Make that office environment a meaningful experiential, so that all these smart tech people can feed off of each other, right? Very basic thing. No cost. You can do that, right?

Somebody in my organization had a power drill. They just came in and started taking down walls and cubicles. I was like, okay, we'll just act like I'm not seeing that. I think the other thing that government needs to do in the skill space, they lost institutional knowledge. The future is to bring in different tech, so requirements aren't embedded in the tech. Figure that one out.

I think that the answers, I want to say this, aren't as hard as we think they are in upskilling our people. It's a big government. So, it's a lot, which makes things challenging. But if you break down those small components, how do I attract people? I make coming to work enjoyable. Put them with people who are very, very focused forward in tech. Give them something new to do that is meaningful and not a test and not training.

Hey Stu, go build me this. Just do it. Just do it. It's not going to be a proof of concept. It's not going to be a pilot. It's going to be iteration one of something really cool. And I think that will excite people.

I also think that government needs to look differently at recruiting. Why wouldn't we look at tech high school level people.

STUART BROWN: Agreed.

NANCY SIEGER: As opposed to people with four-year degrees? I think that our future in tech is going to be at that level.

STUART BROWN: I could not agree more. I think the future in tech is at that level. I think, you know, I mean, you see the, you see some of the big platforms like Palantir and others talk about this, Anduril and others, where they're like, I'd rather get somebody that's tech-curious in high school and train them because I can make them better technologists. And the reality is, like, I think the education landscape is shifting. And what's interesting about this, and I have a 24-year-old and a 21-year-old. So, you know, as you look at that sort of, that's sort of the first AI-enabled cohorts to come out.

Now they're at the tail end of that, you know, they were the ChatGPT end. But you know, what's coming next is going to be learners that know how to learn. I was talking to my daughter about this as she gets ready to graduate in May. And I'm like, you know, when I'm going to start looking for people to hire, I'm going to start looking for people to come with a workforce with them. And that workforce is agentic. And knowing how to orchestrate it. It doesn't mean you need to be a coder. And she's not. But I think the idea of, like, understanding how to orchestrate a team of your own, which normally you would have spent time to learn.

When you get here, you now can bring your own team and you can say, here's what I did and how I orchestrated, and I think if you can find those people, that talent will do amazing things in your organization.

NANCY SIEGER: And they're not, coders are... I'm trying not to say this, but it came out. I don't know that even there's a place for coders in our future, given the tools that we have, right? If you think requirements with AI, you do need to know how to troubleshoot code maybe, but I think it's going to be a different skill set.

STUART BROWN: I think it's a developer skill set, not a coder skill set. I think that's the difference we're talking about. And this is where I think, you know, we're going to need more CS degrees than ever, but they're going to be different. Back to my point, you're an orchestrator now. And you've got to understand. You've got to understand what tech is, you've got to understand. I mean, if you're, we still need software engineers to understand how the memory works, how the data works, and what's the best way to architect. But once we've sort of got those pieces figured out, call it vibe coding, call it what you want.

But I mean, the idea of being able to, if one old coder that could have done X amount of code can now do ten things simultaneously by being an orchestrator, I mean, builders love that, right? I mean, they love that idea.

NANCY SIEGER: Our success will not be, how many lines of code did you generate today, right?

STUART BROWN: No, It will not. It will be how many applications did you build today?

NANCY SIEGER: Exactly. What new capabilities or features did you deploy?

STUART BROWN: And I think the one advantage we now have is, all of this happening right now with the federal government. And I'd like to get your thought on this, right. We're now at a point where the technology leaps. We're not, they don't have to go through the SaaS era and the Paths era and everything else.

Everybody, like, they can go straight to this new world of working, which I think is actually a huge advantage because you're not going to have a lot of unwound tech debt from the last five to seven years.

NANCY SIEGER: Right, agreed. I agree, and it's really projecting, where am I going to be two years from now? Where do I need to be and how do I need to be thinking in that way? I remember somebody I worked with about ten years ago who just kept walking the halls saying, it's all going to be about the data. It's all going to be about the data.

STUART BROWN: It's all about the data. It's all about the data.

NANCY SIEGER: Find those people who are like, it's all going to be about this. It's all going to be about this. And CIOs go there, right. Take your workforce there and figure out, you know, how do we get there. You know, what are the next two things? People would say, what do you mean? I'm like, I don't know, go find those next two things and go there. And that really is my hope.

With all this change focused on federal CIOs, what a great opportunity to be a federal CIO. If all of the baggage of the past goes away as they bring in the new expectations, lighten up governance, you know, govern outcomes, maybe not, you know, CIO, how do I know you're spending the right amount of money on a data center?

Really? Lighten up governance and give your IT professionals, treat them like IT professionals. Give them the space they need to continue to grow and learn and enjoy their jobs and focus on that, you know, customer experience. Whoever your customer is, whether it's a Vet or an airman or a taxpayer, you know, that magic mix all has to come together. The CIO expectations are out there. How to, how does government deliver that? What else has to happen to deliver that?

STUART BROWN: And your point on data is so, so, right. I mean, I've been screaming this for a while, like, the data is the currency of the future. And what was interesting, what you said, and where I've seen really unlock with the OpenClaw era and the NemoClaw and those kinds of stuff is where I think enterprise will go now. I mean, OpenClaw is not enterprise. I want to make sure, if anybody out there hits the comments and says, this guy is crazy.

But, you know, there's a reason why Microsoft and Nvidia and others are starting to build this out, because the idea of how OpenClaw works is basically you construct an intelligent computer that is yours, that has memory and compute layer and GPU layer. We're going to do the same thing in enterprise, where those layers are intelligent in and of themselves, regardless of the systems that are in it, the data that feeds it.

Now, the interesting thing about that, and I think this would be really huge for government and also regulated organizations, is the data can stay in situ. This is really important. We've moved data around too much. Whenever you move data, it costs money. And whenever you move data, you risk it, right? And also you duplicate it, and it gets watered down. Our ability to leave the data where it sits, secure, wherever that is. But get the intelligence out of it without moving it, is going to be the unlock that's going to take this to the next level, I think.

NANCY SIEGER: Totally agree with you. Don't move it around, don't copy it, don't have your own, you know, and just start using it now. You know, government would say it's not perfect. You're going to work on making it perfect or you're going to use it and make it perfect. Just get in there and use it. I think that that focus and this change around platforms, drive your data the right way.

Don't forget about security. Come on. You know, where I came from, IRS, has access to the country's tax records. Your data, my data. We cannot get so excited about tech without saying some of those guardrails are, you know, cybersecurity practices, getting ready for quantum, just kind of put that out there, too, with all these great ideas in the future. You know, think about what your guardrails are, think about your guiding principles.

Leave my data where it is. Have everybody come to the data. Field of dreams, right? So, you know, I'm excited about the future.

STUART BROWN: I am, too. Well, Nancy, I always end this asking one question. So, I want to wrap up each episode by asking, what is your guideline? So, if you had one guiding principle that you could leave out there with our listeners today, what would you say it is?

NANCY SIEGER: My guideline for technology professionals is: Just do it. Just do it. In government, my former colleagues, you know, in IRS and Treasury, just do it. And if it's the right thing, it's the right thing. Maybe you'll learn from it. You learn a lot from it not being the right thing. So, I say, I leave people with, just do it.

STUART BROWN: I love that, I mean, for me, it's what gets me up every day. It's why I still do what I do, because I love to just do it. And I love the learning that's coming in. I think if you inspire that in your teams, what I learn from that, if you inspire that in your teams, and if you show your team that that's what you're doing, the work product you get out is so different.

So, Nancy, thank you. This is awesome. A great conversation. I appreciate your time.

NANCY SIEGER: Thank you.

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