Transcription

Announcer:

The "Behind the Buy" podcast features audio stories told by members of the Federal acquisition workforce who have successfully executed best practice IT contracting strategies from the TechFAR and Digital Services Playbook to help their agency meet its mission.

Anne:

Hello, I'm Anne Rung- Administrator of the Office of Federal Procurement Policy. Today for the Administration's Behind the Buy audio series, we'll listen to a former founding member of a private equity firm discuss assigning one leader and holding that person accountable for IT services. Chris Cairns recently served as one of the White House's Presidential Innovation Fellows for the Department of the Treasury; and is now the Managing Director of 18F Consulting- which provides hands-on consulting services to Federal leaders who need assistance in designing and managing software acquisitions using modern techniques. Welcome to Behind the Buy, Chris.

Anne (Warm-Up Questions):

Given your extremely successful career in the business world. What inspired you to join the Federal Government?

How did you view the Government when you were in the private sector?

Has your perspective changed since joining the Government?

How can people from the private sector benefit the Government by joining organizations like 18F?

Anne:

There must be a single leader who has the authority and responsibility to assign tasks and work elements; make business, product, and technical decisions; and be accountable for the success or failure of the overall service. This person is ultimately responsible for how well the service meets needs of its users, which is how a service should be evaluated.

How do you assign one leader and hold that person accountable?

Chris:

• There are two parts to this question. The first is how do you "assign one leader?" And the second is how do you "hold that person accountable?"

• Let me start with the first. When it comes to creating a digital product, you're looking for someone who exhibits the following characteristics: (1) has a strong vision for the product; (2) is an expert in the domain; (3) capable of empathizing with the needs of users; (4) capable of balancing and prioritizing the needs of the business and users; (5) understands the product management discipline, although I'd argue that this can be learned on-the-job from a good coach.

• As for the second part of the question, the best way to hold that person accountable is to make sure his/her performance plan reflects what the goals for the product are. And to make sure there are real consequences for non-performance. Keep in mind that the product owner can't do it alone. To reduce any friction to his/her success, other individuals in the organization who perform critical functions in support of the product should be held accountable as well.

Anne:

How do you identify a project owner in the private sector versus Government?

Chris:

• How you identify in terms of what you're looking for from a product owner wouldn't be any different.

Anne:

What kind of technical background should a project owner have?

Chris:

• As long as the product owner exhibits the characteristics that I mentioned earlier, he or she can be effective without a deep technical background. In the same vein as empathizing with users, however, the product owner must be able to understand the needs of the development team. And what they need is the opportunity to craft a product that is technically excellent, which not only makes it a joy to work with but reliable and adaptable as well. Sometimes this requires making priority decisions between working on a functional requirement vs. a non-functional requirement now. In order to make those decisions, the product owner must understand technical practices such as automated testing and, very importantly, the concept of technical debt, which refers to the consequences of poor quality code and design. Too much technical debt will cripple any project.

Anne:

What does an effective project management work plan include?

Chris:

• A project management approach for an agile project is very different from a traditional waterfall project. Anytime you're in a situation where it's neither reasonable nor realistic to predict all requirements upfront, then agile is the way to go.

• In this case, you want a project management approach that reinforces the principles of agile development. Principles such as the delivery of working software every couple of weeks, as opposed to months. And this is what you get by following methodologies such as Scrum or Extreme Programming.

Anne:

Why are strong relationships with the contracting officer and other supporting offices important?

Chris:

• I personally don't think it's possible to deliver the highest-valued, highest-quality digital services without a cross-functional team composition. And that includes acquisition

professionals. The government relies heavily on external vendors to provide the necessary services/products to build and deliver digital services, and that means procurement.

•   At 18F, we strongly advocate procurement modularity by breaking an overall acquisition into many short-term, small-dollar acquisitions involving multiple vendors. This often requires the government to play the role of systems integrator, which means continually developing, awarding, and managing acquisitions.

•   All this is a way of saying that acquisition specialists are critical.

Anne:
What organizational changes are necessary to ensure that the project manager has sufficient authority and support for the project?
Chris:
•   Really depends on the specific context of the project. Required organizational changes could be anything from a structural change to who can and can't make decisions.

•   I think the simplest change that needs to happen is for the executive sponsors to make the project official and to constitute an integrated product team from different parts of the organization. That's typically done through a formal charter.

•   As I mentioned earlier, everyone who is central to the success of the project should have a performance plan that reflects what they're expected to achieve. And part of how individuals should be assessed is how effectively they take direction from or support the product owner. This is especially important since people typically operate in highly-matrixed environments, with different reporting lines.

Anne:
Can you describe how a project manager adds or removes features from an IT service?
Chris:
•   I'd define a feature as a distinguishing characteristic or capability of a digital service that delivers value to the end user. Given this definition, which features to work on is really a decision that the product owner must make based on what he/she thinks delivers the most value based on user research with consideration to both cost and risk. This is in essence prioritization.

•   The product owner should look to implement and release the minimum set of highest-priority features that will generate an ROI. This is sometimes called the minimum viable product, or minimum marketable features.

•   In some cases, as a project progresses, it may turn out that the cost to deliver all desired features isn't feasible. Or they simply aren't as critical as originally thought. Let's assume that the product owner could only release 20% of the originally identified features, it's very likely that the product will still deliver 80% of the desired value. Moral of the story, focus on priority features first.

•   One additional point. If there's evidence that a feature isn't delivering value, or is no longer necessary, after the digital service has been up and running, remove it. Every line of code adds complexity and makes software more difficult to work with.

Anne:
How essential is succession planning for accountability leaders?

Chris:
• 	To minimize impact, you should always have someone on the team, if possible, who can perform the Product Owner function at least on the interim basis. The Product Owner, after all, will need to take time off during his/her tenure. As I mentioned earlier, pick your next Product Owner based on the characteristics that are critical to performing that role well.
• 	From an organizational standpoint, agencies should systematically start to develop a cadre of individuals who can perform Product Owner functions. These are exciting positions that will attract some of the best talent. Having a pool of qualified Product Owners will certainly minimize the impacts of turnover.

Anne:
Thank you Chris for sharing your public service story. Behind the Buy welcomes innovation and collaboration from both Industry and Government to highlight best practices in Federal IT procurement. We want to hear about your experience to increase the awareness and adoption of proven techniques. Share your experiences and learn from your peers by visiting buyers club dot idea scale dot com and clicking "TechFAR Hub Use Cases." Access curated expertise, prices paid data, and contract vehicles for categorized goods and services by visiting the Acquisition Gateway at hallways dot cap dot gsa dot gov.
As always, thanks for tuning in.
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