Evolving Role of the State CIO as Change Leader

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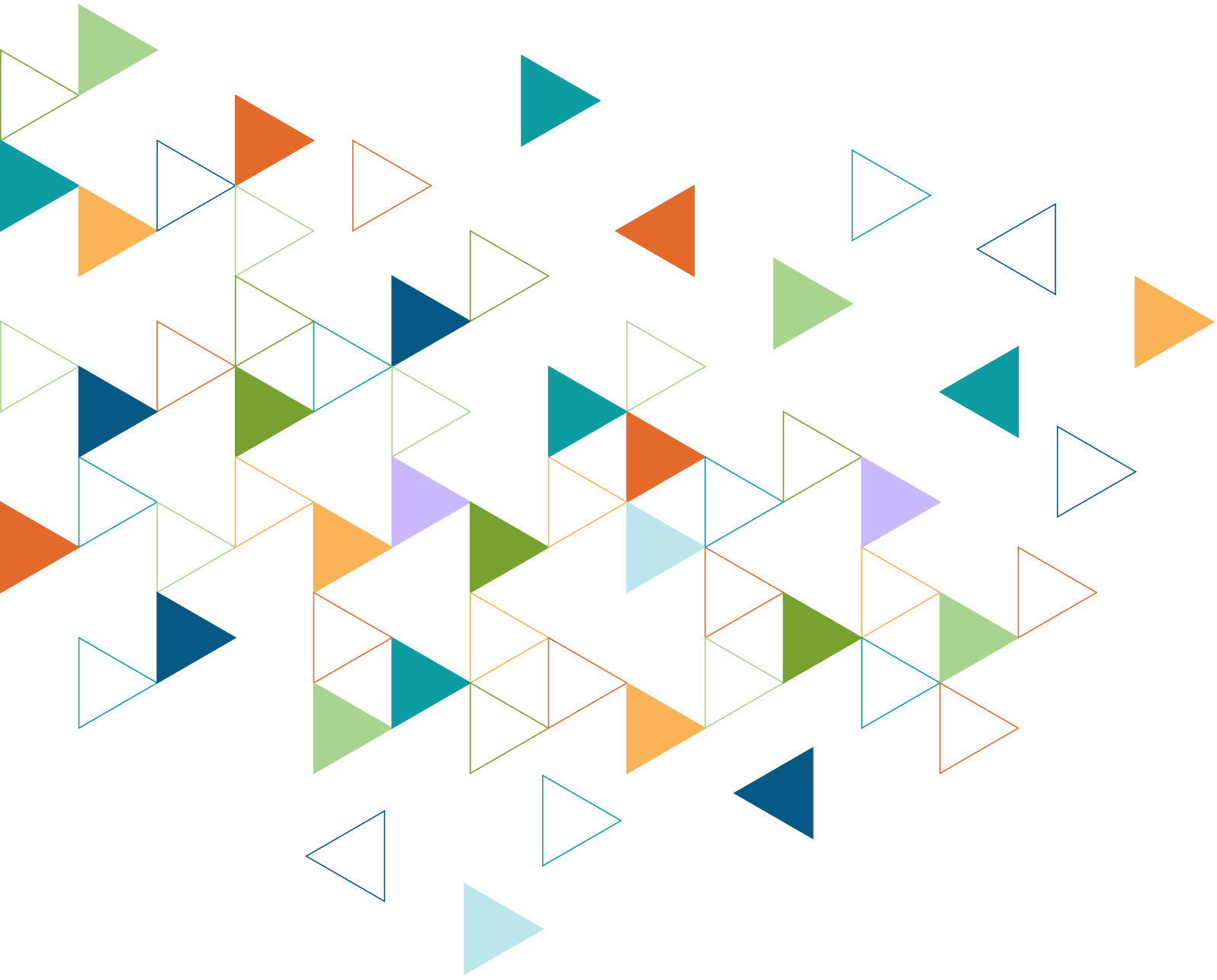


NASCIO
Representing Chief Information Officers of the States

Key Takeaways

- The state CIO dual mandates of current operations and future innovation
- Core responsibilities of the state CIO
- The new state CIO operating model
- Current strategic priorities
- Benefits of the new operating model
- Call to action

The Evolution of the State CIO Role

The state chief information officer (CIO) role has evolved from primarily a technology operator focused on infrastructure oversight and tactical project delivery to now the role of executive enterprise *change leader.* Today's CIO must simultaneously ensure reliable statewide technology operations while driving continuous modernization across government.

As an executive-level change leader, the state CIO, like very few state executives, maintains a comprehensive purview of the state government. This broad and deep understanding of state government is achieved through a number of parallel synergistic operating disciplines within their organization such as:

- Strategic planning
- Enterprise architecture
- Enterprise portfolio management / IT investment management
- Business relationship management
- Project execution and success

Over the past decade, as the role of the state CIO has evolved, NASCIO has emphasized the importance of predominant traits that make the state CIO effective at the executive level. The 2025 State CIO Survey identified what respondents consider the most important leadership trait of a state CIO and that is the emphasis of this report – *Change Leader*.

The characteristics we see here build upon but go beyond operating disciplines. There are inherent characteristics in the state CIO role that make it dynamic, engaging and interactive. These interactions are essential to gaining collaboration and support from the state government ecosystem comprised of agency organizations and their individual cultures.

> *"Understand that most of your job has nothing to do with IT."*
> *–State CIO*

Dual Role of the State CIO Relies on Enterprise Architecture

The state CIO and state CIO organization have emerged into expansive roles with a dual mission.

- *Run the enterprise* – provide reliable, secure and compliant operation of enterprise technology.
- *Renew the enterprise* – provide continuous modernization to meet future service, workforce and policy needs.

Both roles leverage enterprise architecture as a reliable record of what is in place and provide the capability for understanding the full impact of any change. In both of these roles the state CIO maintains engagement with peers across the state and their own staff through relationship building. This adds to the understanding of the state government environment. The state CIO and their staff are working at the operational level and the strategic level, understanding program needs and aspirations and securing the necessary enabling business and technology capabilities. This is an expansive role that goes beyond "keeping the lights on."

The Dual Mandate on State CIOs

While continuous improvement is in play, the state CIO must also maintain a keen awareness of the environmental context within which state government operates. Environmental factors include:

- Fiscal circumstances
- Executive and political leadership changes
- National and global macroeconomics
- Changing citizen expectations
- Regulations
- Federal mandates
- New developments in business and technology capabilities

Within this context state government has emerging needs and opportunities that must be vetted prioritized and addressed. Those that make the cut require clear strategic intent – that is, what will be delivered. Further, any defined strategic intent must include an assessment of risk. NASCIO published the

State CIO Top 10 Enterprise Risks for 2022 and those risks hold true today. The state CIO as executive change leader is a risk manager who evaluates operational value streams for risk reduction but also takes calculated risks based on the probability and magnitude of potential value.

> Business architecture value streams are an end-to-end flow of activities depicted from a stakeholder perspective. Value streams are the "second pillar" alongside business capabilities, in the business architecture realm. If capabilities are the "what," the value streams are the "how."
>
> James Martin is credited with coining the term "value streams" in his book *The Great Transition*.

The two aforementioned mandates are not sequential; they are simultaneous and can be articulated with the following examples of actions.

Run the Enterprise (Exploit):

- *Manage* business relationships with internal customers
- *Manage* vendors, contracts, budgets, investments and audits
- *Scope* and deliver projects effectively within an enterprise project portfolio
- *Operate* core IT infrastructure and platforms
- *Ensure* cybersecurity, privacy and regulatory compliance
- *Deliver* shared services with predictable performance
- *Maintain* public trust and service continuity
- *Improve* data quality
- *Pursue* cost efficiencies

The state CIO must run the operations of the state enterprise and while doing so maintain a critical evaluation of what could and should be transformed through modernization investment. The state CIO must exploit what business and technology capabilities the state has in place currently and engage external partnering to deliver the very best citizen outcomes possible.

This translates to continual monitoring of state agency value streams and enabling business and technology capabilities to measure effectiveness and make changes where necessary to continuously evaluate and improve service delivery through these agency value streams. The CIO's office itself has its own inherent value streams which must also be evaluated and continually transformed.

Renew the Enterprise (Explore):

- *Influence* business strategy
- *Explore* new value streams and enabling business and technology capabilities
- *Align* services and program enhancements
- *Develo*p future-ready workforce skills
- *Test* new digital service models and technologies
- *Pilot* data sharing, analytics, and AI capabilities
- *Experiment* with new governance and procurement approaches
- *Reduce* long-term risk through early learning

As a change leader with an *expansive role* the state CIO will be evaluating innovative business and technology advancements which will enable transformation of existing value streams. Further, the CIO will be exploring with their agency peers what is possible regarding new value streams and new capabilities.

Even as the state CIO facilitates the defining and scoping of experiments there must be clear strategic intent for those experiments. That will ensure that resources are effectively applied. Keep in mind an experiment is still successful if the conclusion of such is to not proceed with a particular value stream or enabling capability. It may not be appropriate for deploying within state government, or it may not be ready yet.

For example, the emerging and even burgeoning developments in quantum computing, for which the state CIO as change leader is already anticipating and preparing. Quantum computing capabilities will require long term preparation, workforce future-readiness, candidate value streams, business processes, roles and responsibilities that must be explored now. Moving into quantum computing will have to have an on ramp that anticipates epics (or eras) in development similar to what has been experienced with artificial intelligence (AI).

Looking at these two mandates together

The state CIO is a *change leader* and that role is conducted within current operations and in exploring new potential opportunities, value streams and enabling capabilities.

> ***"Get out there and meet people, within the organization, other agencies, other states, municipalities, vendor partners… relationships are the currency of our job." –State CIO***

Structural Components of the New CIO Operating Model

As the state CIO *orchestrates* their organization to execute on both mandates, there are recognizable different rules bounding governance, funding and reporting. The exploration layer of the state CIO's responsibilities is an expansive one: the CIO and the CIO organization must have the *freedom to act*. And in exploring innovation it must be expected that some experiments will result in "no-go" decisions. These are not failures as any experiment is worthwhile if it completes and brings about a conclusion.

In parallel with the state CIO as innovator and explorer is the ongoing, sustainable core operations role that "keeps things running" – *i.e., the status quo*. These operations have the more traditional guard rails and governance structures that ensure reliable service delivery.

The following three layers describe this complex role of the state CIO organization.

The Core Operations Layer – Run the Enterprise

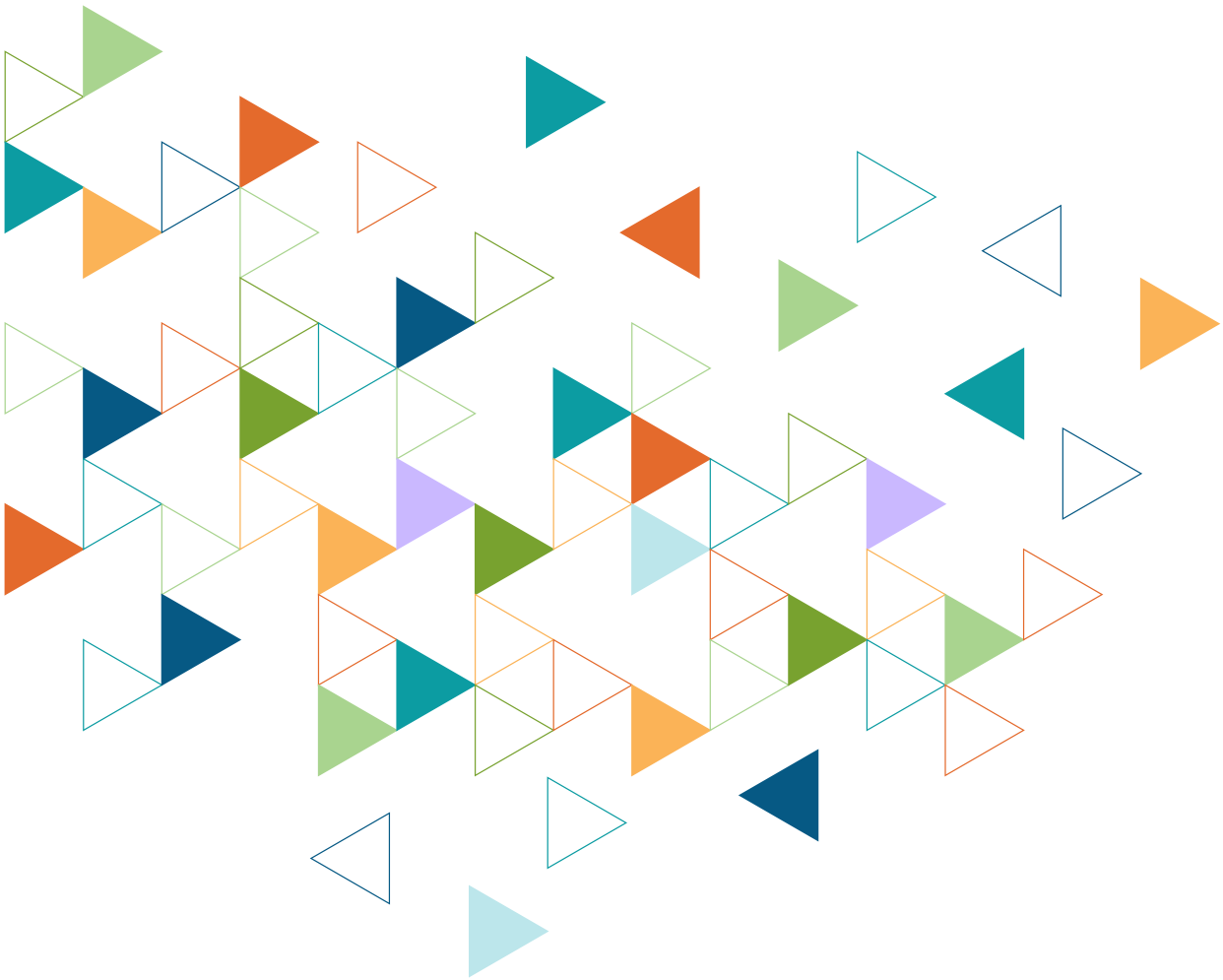
This layer focuses on stability, efficiency and compliance. It includes infrastructure, enterprise applications, cybersecurity operations, service management and vendor oversight. Success is measured through uptime, security posture, cost control and audit outcomes.

The Exploration and Modernization Layer – Renew the Enterprise

This layer operates with different delivery rules. It may include a digital services team, an AI enablement office or a modernization lab. It uses sandbox environments, rapid pilots and time-bound experiments with defined exit or scale criteria.

The State Government Executive Integration Layer

The state CIO integrates both layers at the executive leadership level. This includes portfolio governance, funding arbitration and decisions about when pilots transition into enterprise services. This integration involves two important dimensions to consider. First, timing or time horizons. Second, with the importance of delivering citizen outcomes.

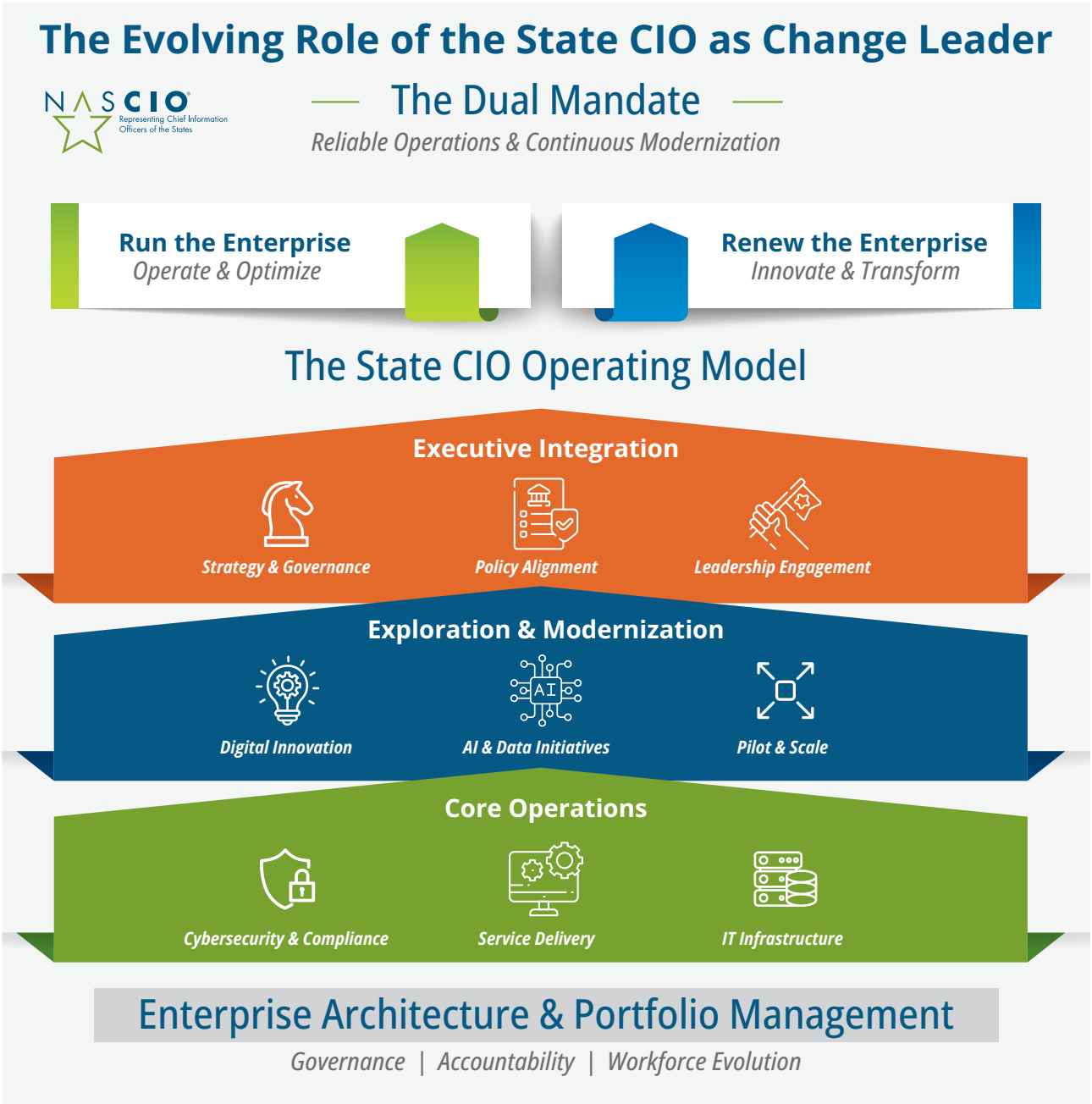


Time Horizons Managed within Enterprise-wide Portfolio Management

The state CIO organization manages technology and business capabilities, including workforce, within an enterprise-wide portfolio management system (EPM) integrated with an information technology investment management system (ITIM).

- Time Horizon 1: Run and optimize existing system portfolio
- Time Horizon 2: Scale proven business process, digital and data capabilities
- Time Horizon 3: Explore available and emerging business and technology capabilities and service models

Each horizon has distinct resource mechanisms, metrics and decision rights. These include strategy development, funding, workforce, relationship management, marketing and communication.



Core Operations and Exploration of Digital Government

Application of this structure is most relevant to the current emphasis on digital government and citizen services and digital implementation and orchestration. For many reasons state government has prioritized *digital government and citizen services*, appearing on the State CIO Top Ten every year starting in 2018. This priority currently ranks at **number 5 on the State CIO Top Ten for 2026** and it was ranked second in the top ten from 2020 through 2024. This emphasis was explored in NASCIO's publication, **Creating a Citizen Centric Digital Experience: How Far Have We Come?**

Core operations within digital government and citizen services focuses on:

- End-to-end digital services for high-volume transactions
- Identity, access and consent patterns
- Seamless and effortless, high-quality customer experiences that occur within and between contact channels
- Data interoperability and exchange

Exploration within this realm focuses on:

- How to better engage with citizens
- A complete enterprise view of the citizen, integrating all agencies
- New methods for streamlining identity management
- Data integration across agencies
- Citizen engagement through human-centered design

Operationalization occurs when successful patterns are standardized into shared architectures including value streams, business and technology capabilities, platforms and components.

Core Operations and Exploration of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence is a set of capabilities like no other in history, thus, requiring special attention and governance. The new state CIO operating model treats AI governance as a repeatable enterprise function rather than a one-time policy.

Core operations within this realm focus on:

- Fraud detection
- Eligibility determination
- Cyber anomaly detection
- Workflow efficiency
- Operational forecasting

Exploration within this realm focuses on:

- New digital citizen experiences
- Enterprise knowledge copilots
- Cross-agency orchestration
- Policy simulation
- Workforce augmentation

Exploration of emerging AI epics and capabilities allows for controlled experimentation. Operations imbed governance into identity management, logging and audit, security and procurement systems.

Decision Rights and Accountability

The state CIO as an executive change leader will create and rely on carefully constructed governance. Effective governance entails effective business relationship management while prescribing the separation of decision rights based on defined roles, scope of responsibility and resident know-how.

The CIO decision rights:

- Owns enterprise technology strategy and standards
- Authorizes movement between exploration and production
- Documents architecture components within enterprise portfolio management, including value streams, business and technology capabilities, data, business processes
- Ensures legal, security and ethical alignment
- Reports progress and risk to executive leadership

Agency partner decision rights:

- Propose use cases
- Participate in pilots
- Assume operational ownership once capabilities scale
- Foster adoption of new value streams and capabilities

Shared decision rights:

- Anticipate emerging demands and mandates for new value streams and business and technology capabilities needed to continually transform state government—ensuring it is relevant and effective in serving citizens

Workforce and Talent Management

How do we actually get work done? How do ideas turn into reality? Through our highly valued and most important resource – people. The emerging state CIO change leader and the emerging new CIO operating model blends traditional information technology roles with:

- Product and service managers
- Business relationship managers
- Human-centered designers
- Enterprise architects
- Enterprise portfolio manager including cloud service portfolio managers
- Finance and marketing roles
- Data and AI engineers
- Policy, legal and privacy partners (embedded early)
- Security engineers as design collaborators

Benefits Anticipated with the Emerging State CIO Operating Model

The state CIO as a *change leader* employs what we are describing as a *new operating model* which fulfills the aforementioned *dual mandate* and provides the following benefits:

Institutional Resilience

- Fosters a discipline of continual renewal and transformation
- Maintains engagement with agencies
- Ensures continual evaluation of value streams and enabling capabilities
- Maintains vigilance regarding incremental improvements in operations

Responsible Innovation

- Prevents innovation from being constrained by operational rules
- Avoids ungoverned experimentation
- Creates a clear path from pilot to enterprise capability
- Builds institutional learning and resilience

Sustained Public Trust

- Sustains public trust while modernizing services
- Maintains an attitude of continual transformation and renewal across state government
- Builds effective cross agency collaboration

The Road Ahead

> *"Become comfortable with being uncomfortable – daily challenges are beyond technology." –State CIO*

There are many state CIOs that are in an expansive role as executive change leader. Those in this expansive role are positioned as strategic advisors to the governor and other cabinet members. Oftentimes those in this role also have frequent service and strategic advisory interactions with other branches of government, local government, education, government related non-profits and industry. These CIOs are employing a new state CIO operating model that is enabled through effective enterprise architecture. The state CIO operating model must support both enterprise reliability and intentional continuous renewal. By formalizing exploration alongside operations and integrating them at the executive leadership level, the state CIO change leader enables responsible innovation that can scale into durable public value. Both of these mandates are carefully governed and managed with effective business architecture structure, organization and processes.

The State CIO Journey into the Future – A Call to Action

The evolving role of the state CIO is remarkable in its expansive portfolio of responsibilities, challenges, complexities and even adventure. Those individuals who have entered into this role are in an exciting time as it continues to evolve and expand. It cannot be fulfilled alone - it takes a team. No one person can be an expert in every possible business or technological issue or capability. The CIO relies on a capable team to fulfill this expansive role. State CIOs should begin now to explore these two mandates with their staff and develop their own business architecture complete with value streams to mature the delivery of value through both mandates.

The emerging role of the CIO is one of leadership engaging and employing others in a concerted effort to deliver on the promises and obligations of state governments. Agencies and legislatures should engage and support this expansive role of the state as essential to achieving their strategic mission. The state CIO and their staff are dedicated to successfully achieving that intent in achieving the best possible outcomes for people paying for government – our citizens.

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About NASCIO

Founded in 1969, the National Association of State Chief Information Officers (NASCIO) represents state chief information officers (CIOs) and technology executives and managers from the states, territories and District of Columbia. NASCIO's mission is to advance government excellence through trusted collaboration, partnerships and technology leadership. NASCIO provides state CIOs and state members with products and services designed to support the challenging role of the state CIO, stimulate the exchange of information and promote the adoption of IT best practices and innovations. From national conferences to peer networking, research and publications, briefings and government affairs, NASCIO is the premier network and resource for state CIOs.