

FOCUS FORWARD

A State CIO-Led Foundation for Tennessee's Future-Ready Technology Workforce,
Operating Model, and Service Delivery

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State	Tennessee
Agency	Tennessee Department of Finance & Administration, Strategic Technology Solutions (STS)
Award category	State CIO Office Special Recognition
Project title	Focus Forward
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Executive Summary

In 2025, Tennessee's State CIO office, through Strategic Technology Solutions (STS), launched Focus Forward to prepare the state's technology organization for a more modern, resilient, and strategically aligned operating model. The initiative recognizes that rising demand for secure digital services, cloud capability, data-informed decisions, artificial intelligence readiness, and consistent agency service delivery cannot be met through legacy workforce practices or isolated process improvements alone.

The foundation of Focus Forward is complete. STS conducted the Focus Forward: Organizational & Talent Evaluation, a comprehensive review of the organization's structure, skills, governance, ways of working, and talent resiliency. The evaluation included leadership interviews, operational artifact review, workforce input, peer-state benchmarking, and technical skills assessment data. It produced a clear enterprise message: STS has the foundation and willingness to modernize, but needs clearer enterprise direction, stronger governance, modern delivery practices, role clarity, and a deliberate workforce strategy focused on skills, succession, and talent pipelines.

STS has already moved from evaluation to action. Findings from the evaluation informed targeted workforce training, including business analysis courses on functional and non-functional requirements, brainstorming techniques, and modeling techniques for business analysis. These courses are examples of how the state CIO office is turning assessment data into practical upskilling aligned to modernization needs.

Focus Forward also establishes the starting point for Tennessee's journey from project-based delivery toward product-oriented service management. That journey begins now, with training, role exploration, and planned pilot agencies that will help test product-oriented delivery, governance, role definitions, and agency engagement before broader scale. The submission intentionally frames this as an ongoing, structured transformation rather than the fully implemented product model future-state.

Focus Forward demonstrates state CIO office leadership because it goes beyond technology implementation. It addresses the workforce, governance, structure, roles, and delivery model required to deliver reliable, secure, responsive, and mission-aligned technology services across Tennessee state government.

Judge-ready framing

The state CIO office did not simply participate in a training effort or another agency project. It initiated and led an enterprise transformation foundation: assessing the organization, identifying talent and operating model risks, activating targeted training, and beginning a disciplined path toward product-oriented service delivery.

1. Idea

The challenge

State IT organizations are expected to deliver more secure, accessible, data-enabled, and citizen-centered services while adapting to cloud, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity demands, and evolving agency expectations. For STS, meeting that challenge required a broader view than any single tool, training class, or reorganization could provide.

The Focus Forward evaluation found that STS needs a clearer enterprise IT strategy and operating model. The practical message from the readout is that STS must move from pockets of good practice to a more unified enterprise operating model with stronger alignment across technology, data, talent, culture, governance, ways of working, structure, and metrics.

The evaluation also highlighted workforce and succession risk. Approximately 30 percent of the workforce is at or nearing retirement age within five years, about 30 percent lack artificial intelligence experience or are unsure how to apply AI in their role, and only about 14 percent of team leaders under the CIO have a ready-now successor. These findings make clear that modernization is a workforce and operating model challenge, not just a technology challenge.

The innovation

Focus Forward is innovative because it treats transformation as an integrated system. It connects enterprise strategy, organizational structure, workforce capability, role clarity, governance, targeted training, and product-oriented delivery into one CIO-led transformation approach.

Evaluation theme	What the readout said	Why it matters
Enterprise IT strategy and operating model	STS should refresh and align around a statewide IT strategy that supports modernization, standardization, innovation, and consistent service delivery.	Creates a common direction and reduces disconnected approaches across the technology enterprise.
Organizational structure	Recommended actions include formalizing Enterprise Architecture, forming Platform Teams, creating a Transformation Management Office or similar function, realigning Data Center and Cloud resources, growing Vendor Management, strengthening cloud security, and expanding collaboration forums.	Clarifies the capabilities and structures needed to execute modernization at scale.
Governance	Governance should be lighter, clearer, and more accountable, with better decision models and alignment between agency autonomy and enterprise efficiency.	Improves speed and accountability without adding unnecessary bureaucracy.
Workforce resiliency	The readout identified skill gaps, succession risks, and strong openness to learning and change.	Focuses modernization investment on skills, roles, career pathways, and talent pipelines.
Modern delivery practices	The report calls attention to Product Strategy and Management, role clarity, and enhanced project management and delivery.	Provides the bridge from traditional project delivery toward sustained service ownership.

2. State CIO Office Leadership

The state CIO Office Special Recognition category requires more than participation. Focus Forward was initiated and led through the state CIO office as an enterprise effort to position STS for a future-ready IT operating model.

Leadership element	How Focus Forward demonstrates it
Initiation	The State CIO office established Focus Forward as an enterprise modernization and talent resiliency priority, beginning with the Organizational & Talent Evaluation.

Leadership element	How Focus Forward demonstrates it
Executive direction	The evaluation produced enterprise recommendations across strategy, governance, structure, workforce, roles, technology capabilities, and ways of working.
Action from findings	STS moved from assessment to targeted training and activation planning rather than stopping at analysis.
Enterprise reach	The work spans technical capability, business analysis, product-oriented delivery, Enterprise Architecture, platform strategy, governance, cloud, data, vendor management, and talent pipelines.
Public value	The intended outcome is a stronger STS organization able to deliver secure, reliable, responsive, and mission-aligned services to agencies and Tennesseans.

State CIO leadership proof point

Focus Forward is not being positioned as a divisional training plan. It is the State CIO office using enterprise evidence to guide modernization decisions, workforce investment, governance improvements, and the next phase of operating model change.

3. Implementation

Focus Forward is being implemented through connected workstreams that move from evaluation to targeted action and then to controlled pilots. This version deliberately distinguishes completed work from work that is beginning or planned.

Workstream	Status	Action / evidence	Output
Organizational & Talent Evaluation	Completed	Leadership interviews, artifact review, benchmarking, workforce input, talent analysis, and operating model recommendations.	A fact-based enterprise readout identifying strategy, governance, workforce, structure, role, and delivery model priorities.
Technical skills assessment baseline	Completed / foundational	More than 1,100 in-person technical skills assessments across 37 role-based paths, where applicable to the evaluation baseline.	Quantifiable insight into current workforce capability and areas requiring focused development.
Targeted workforce training	Completed for initial courses; continuing as needs are identified	Business analysis training was developed and completed, including: Understanding Functional and Non-Functional Requirements, Analysis, and the Critical Role They Play in Project Success; Applying Brainstorming Techniques; and Modeling Techniques for Business Analysis.	Evidence that evaluation findings are leading to concrete upskilling, not just recommendations.

Workstream	Status	Action / evidence	Output
Enterprise strategy and governance activation	Underway	Recommended next steps include leadership alignment, visioning, communication planning, defined success measures, executive sponsors, and a tracking cadence.	Moves the organization from assessment into execution and accountability.
Project-to-Product transformation	Beginning / pilot stage	STS is starting the journey from project to product management through training, role exploration, and pilot agencies.	Creates a controlled way to test product-oriented roles, governance, delivery practices, agency engagement, and success measures before broader scaling.
90-day activation and roadmap	Next phase	Recommended activation includes mobilizing resources, assessing staffing and funding gaps, assigning initiative owners, launching pilots, and capturing lessons learned for a three to 12-month roadmap.	Provides a disciplined path for turning findings into measurable transformation.

Initial targeted training examples

Audience	Course / action	Why it supports Focus Forward
Business Analysts	Understanding Functional and Non-Functional Requirements, Analysis, and the Critical Role They Play in Project Success	Strengthens requirement quality, traceability, and delivery outcomes.
Business Analysts	Applying Brainstorming Techniques	Builds stronger facilitation, discovery, and stakeholder collaboration skills.
Business Analysts	Modeling Techniques for Business Analysis	Improves the ability to visualize processes, define solutions, and communicate business needs.
Broader workforce	Targeted upskilling based on evaluation findings	Supports future-ready skills in areas such as cloud, AI, data, cybersecurity, modern delivery practices, and role-specific capabilities.

Credibility guardrail

The submission should not overstate product management maturity. The stronger claim is that Tennessee has completed a rigorous evaluation, activated targeted training, and is now beginning a disciplined project-to-product journey through pilot agencies and governance.

4. Impact

Focus Forward has already given STS an evidence-based modernization foundation built from 25+ leadership interviews, 20+ operational artifacts reviewed, 1,000+ workforce inputs / survey responses, more than 1,100 in-person technical skills

assessments, and 37 role-based assessment paths. That foundation is now being converted into targeted training, role clarity, governance improvement, succession planning, and Project-to-Product pilot preparation.

Impact area	Evidence to date	Outcome / value
Enterprise visibility	The Focus Forward: Organizational & Talent Evaluation is complete and identifies enterprise needs across strategy, governance, workforce, structure, roles, and operating model.	STS can make modernization decisions from a shared evidence base instead of anecdotal or siloed inputs.
Workforce risk surfaced	The evaluation identified retirement eligibility, AI readiness gaps, and limited ready-now succession coverage among team leaders.	Leadership has a clearer basis for succession planning, talent development, and workforce resiliency actions.
Targeted training delivered	Initial training was developed and completed for business analysts in requirements, brainstorming, and modeling techniques.	Training investments are tied to practical capability needs that support better project and product delivery.
Governance modernization defined	The readout calls for clearer decision models, streamlined IT processes, stronger oversight pathways, and better alignment between agency autonomy and enterprise efficiency.	The organization can improve accountability and speed without simply adding more bureaucracy.
Future-ready structures identified	Recommendations include Enterprise Architecture, Platform Teams, a Transformation Management Office or similar function, stronger Vendor Management, cloud security support, and collaboration forums.	STS has a clearer blueprint for the structures needed to execute modernization and deliver consistent services.
Project-to-Product activation started	STS is beginning product management transformation through training and planned pilot agencies.	The state can test product-oriented delivery in a controlled way before broader enterprise adoption.

Outcome pathway

Evaluation evidence	Targeted action	Operating model change	Agency and citizen value
Organizational & Talent Evaluation, skills baseline, workforce input, benchmarking, leadership interviews	Training, role clarity, governance activation, succession planning, pilot preparation	Clearer decision rights, modern delivery practices, product-oriented service ownership, stronger accountability	More reliable, secure, responsive, and mission-aligned technology services

5. Why This Fits State CIO Office Special Recognition

Category test	Focus Forward response
Did the CIO office initiate and lead the project?	Yes. Focus Forward is a State CIO office-led enterprise transformation foundation, beginning with the Organizational & Talent Evaluation and continuing through training, governance activation, and pilot planning.
Does it showcase innovation and leadership?	Yes. It connects objective workforce data, talent evaluation, targeted upskilling, future-ready roles, governance, and product-oriented delivery into one integrated modernization approach.
Is it more than an internal HR or training effort?	Yes. Training is one action within a broader transformation that includes an operating model, governance, role clarity, enterprise architecture, platform strategy, cloud, vendor management, and agency service delivery.
Is there measurable evidence?	Yes. The submission includes completed evaluation activity, workforce inputs, skills baseline data, and targeted training examples. The project-to-product measures should be added as pilot results mature.
Can other states learn from it?	Yes. The sequence is repeatable and includes the following steps: evaluate objectively, align leadership, mobilize resources, target training, clarify roles, pilot operating model changes, govern progress, and scale what works.
Does it create public value?	Yes. Better skills, clearer ownership, stronger governance, and more modern service delivery practices strengthen the state's ability to deliver secure and responsive digital services.

Transferability to other states

Focus Forward provides a practical model for other State CIO offices facing similar pressures: aging workforce demographics, cloud and AI skill gaps, uneven governance, siloed teams, and rising expectations for digital service delivery. Tennessee's approach shows that modernization can begin with evidence, move quickly to targeted training and governance activation, and then scale through controlled pilots rather than large, untested reorganizations.

6. Closing Statement

Focus Forward demonstrates how a State CIO office can lead beyond technology implementation by building the workforce, governance, roles, structures, and delivery model required for sustainable digital government. Tennessee has completed the foundational evaluation, begun targeted upskilling, and is entering the execution phase of its transformation from project-based delivery toward product-oriented service management. By aligning people, governance, operating model, and service delivery around a common enterprise future, Focus Forward provides a disciplined path to a more resilient, future-ready STS that can better serve agencies and Tennesseans.