



IT, Health IT, Government

Aneesh Chopra, Obama's Chief Technology Officer, Talks About Health IT Geek Squads, Entrepreneurship Prizes, and "Data as a Policy Lever"

Wade Roush 10/7/10

"In the Obama Administration, entrepreneurs are welcome." So said Aneesh Chopra, chief technology officer of the United States, in a keynote speech yesterday at "DC to VC," a summit on healthcare IT investing organized by [Morgenthaler Ventures](#) partner Rebecca Lynn in San Francisco and co-sponsored by Silicon Valley Bank and Venrock. Speaking to a group of venture capital partners, entrepreneurs, and media representatives at the posh St. Francis Yacht Club, Chopra argued that under Barack Obama's leadership, the federal government is doing more than ever before to adopt the latest infotech innovations coming out of Silicon Valley, and to shape federal regulation to encourage entrepreneurial solutions to big challenges like improving public health and nutrition.

I had a chance to delve into the specifics of the administration's pro-entrepreneurship policies with Chopra in a one-on-one interview after his speech (see below). But the big picture, for the charismatic New Jersey-born son of Indian immigrants, is that the government sorely needs the ideas of its citizens—especially programmers—and that it can best stimulate those ideas by making the government's vast troves of data more accessible to outside developers, and then getting out of the way to see what they build.

As a case in point, he cited the story of Dave Augustine, Bob Burbach, and Andrew Carpenter, three developers from San Francisco-based non-profit [WestEd Interactive](#) who came up with a new way to search the antiquated Federal Register as part of the Sunlight Foundation's "Apps for America" contest. "The Archivist of the United States found out about Bob and Dave and Andrew in March, and said, 'You guys have built the best killer app I've seen, can you rebuild the Federal Register website?' and they said, 'Sure,'" Chopra recounted. The new [FederalRegister.gov](#), launched this summer, makes it easy to browse the once-impenetrable collection of government notices, rules, procedures, and documents by topic or date. "These were just random dudes who didn't have lobbyists or procurement departments, but just smart ideas—'cognitive surplus,' as Clay Shirky would say."

President Obama named Chopra as the nation's first CTO in April 2009. As an associate director within the Office of Science & Technology Policy, Chopra's formal assignment was to work with chief information officer Vivek Kundra to set federal technology policies that would make government more efficient and more transparent. "The goal is to give all Americans a voice in their government and ensure that they know exactly how we're spending their money," the President said when he appointed Chopra.

But Chopra has gone far beyond that initial charge, becoming known as an outspoken advocate for making government databases more accessible to developers of consumer software applications, using open source software more widely within government, and spurring innovation through prize-based competitions. Obviously, those are all causes dear to the hearts of most private-sector innovators and entrepreneurs, and Chopra has become a popular figure in Silicon Valley and other innovation hubs. Even before joining the Obama Administration, Chopra, the former secretary of technology for former Virginia Governor Tim Kaine, had been labeled a "venture governmentalist" for his efforts to invest in

high-risk internal technology projects. Bay Area technology guru Tim O'Reilly has [gone so far](#) as to call Chopra a "rock star," saying that he "understands that government technologists need to act more like their counterparts in Silicon Valley."

In his speech at the Morgenthaler summit, Chopra gave numerous examples of the way the Obama Administration is opening government data to entrepreneurial uses. One was the [Apps for Healthy Kids](#) competition, a part of First Lady Michelle Obama's campaign to reduce childhood obesity; the winners of the contest, which challenged entrants to create computer games or tools that make "fun and engaging" use of USDA nutrition data on 1,000 commonly eaten foods, were announced by the White House last month. Chopra said the developer of "[Smash Your Food](#)," one of the winners of the \$60,000 competition, got so excited about the power of software to help people eat better that he ...[NEXT PAGE](#) »

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