

POLITICO

Tech booster knows way to San Jose

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SANTA CLARA, Calif. — Aneesh Chopra, the White House's first chief technology officer, bantered onstage with venture capitalists and forecasters about trends in technology Wednesday night.

The event, held by Silicon Valley's premier business forum, the Churchill Club, involved panelists voting with bicolored ping-pong paddles over the likelihood a trend would take off. Chopra touted the president's tech priorities and initiatives so much that he took some gentle ribbing from fellow panelists about his rah-rah tech optimism.

"My theme tonight is 'yes to everything,'" Chopra joked.

Chopra, who makes quarterly visits to Silicon Valley, has become the de facto face of Washington in the region.

This week, he was driving up and down Highway 101, for numerous speaking engagements over two days on topics ranging from immigration to software to top tech trends.

Chopra appears wherever the industry gathers, whether it's here; Las Vegas; Omaha, Neb.; Austin, Texas; or Seattle. His one-man roadshow is an effort to counter the stodgy image of government as being low tech and slow to adapt. Chopra's message to anyone who will listen is that the federal government is changing, and it needs innovators to work on the nation's biggest policy problems.

"He has bridged the gap between the two worlds," said Vivek Wadhwa, a tech entrepreneur and visiting scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, and Stanford University. "Silicon Valley now has a more positive impression of the government than it ever had before."

Two years into the job, Chopra is viewed here as an enthusiastic advocate for the role technology can play in addressing policy and as a sympathetic messenger who will take the tech industry's concerns directly to the president. It remains to be seen whether he can continue the pace he's set and turn his evangelism into effective policy.

Chopra said in an interview that he frequently visits Silicon Valley and other tech sectors because "to solve the big problems we are facing in health, education and energy, we want to tap into the entrepreneur ecosystems because we want to invent our way out of these challenges.

"I've learned that a lot of these communities do not follow Washington that regularly," Chopra said, adding that part of his job is to get the message out that changes in law could create potential investment opportunities.

Presidents have long had science advisers. What makes his role different, Chopra said, is that he looks at how technology and innovation can address policy priorities, such as

health care costs and quality. So far, Chopra said he is most proud of the administration's efforts in open government. "We have a culture change in Washington that defaults now to openness and connectivity."

Chopra came to the administration with experience moving between government and technology as Virginia's secretary of technology. He previously was managing director at the Advisory Board Co., a publicly traded health care think tank.

"Aneesh has been an excellent catalyst," said Dan'l Lewin, Microsoft's corporate vice president of strategic and emerging business development, who is based in Silicon Valley. "He's been tireless in communicating and driving a conversation among the technology community on a broad range of topics that are relevant to the national agenda."

"His big achievement is putting innovation on the agenda at every agency in the administration," said Dean Garfield, president and chief executive of the Information Technology Industry Council. "Whether you are talking about science policy or economic policy, he's in the middle of the conversation. The guy never sleeps."

Rebecca Lynn, a partner at Morgenthaler Ventures, said Chopra has pushed forth the idea of an open government platform and is the driver behind various programs and contests to encourage entrepreneurs to work on a policy problem.

"He's done a great job on building the bridges and putting a new face on government that things can change," she said.

Chopra has reached out to companies that are not typically associated with providing services to government, said Kevin Merritt, chief executive of Socrata, a Seattle-based firm chosen to be one of several companies delivering data services to the federal government.

"I'm sure we would not be in the position we are in if they were not in their roles," Merritt said about Chopra and Vivek Kundra, the first U.S. chief information officer.

Over the course of several events during his visit to the valley this week, Chopra covered a wide range of topics: immigration reform, education and software, energy and entrepreneurship.

At the Churchill Club forum, optimism was just what Silicon Valley boosters wanted to hear from their guest from Washington.

"Aneesh, keep coming back to Silicon Valley," said Tony Perkins, a venture partner and the panel's moderator. "We need you."