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BUILDING A BRIDGE BETWEEN BUSINESS & GOVERNMENT

How the nonprofit, nonpartisan Government Technology & Services Coalition helps small and midsize companies band together to bring innovation, creativity, and exceptionalism from successful businesses to the homeland and national security missions.

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Q How does GTSC help its members overcome challenges to work together with federal partners?

GTSC has programming to meet all of our members' needs. Our external-reaching programming helps our members understand the homeland and national security mission and meet with the decision makers tasked with achieving it. We also have a series of programming devoted to our members' internal capacity—what can make them the best contractors possible. Our goal is to define and raise awareness of the quality and value of the smaller firms the government has already invested in through numerous small business set-aside programs. Our strong focus on helping our federal partners achieve their mission has brought a lot of different players to the table, and the fact that we were started and are really run by small and mid-sized companies gives us an agility that other organizations don't have. We don't have layers of bureaucracy. We have people who want to *take action*, not *talk*. They are on the cutting edge rather than invested in known systems.

We believe our government market needs more help to bring innovation to mission areas faster. Instead of telling people to read more “best practices” of the private sector, GTSC actually puts panels of innovative CEOs together to talk about their experiences and encourage more interaction and conversation. If government truly brings the

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private sector in to have an open conversation, there's a tremendous amount of cross-pollination and cross-learning that makes everyone more efficient. Ultimately, my members just want to provide the government with what it needs—sometimes they just don't know exactly what that is!

Additionally, the word “innovation” is overused. It's hard to find. However, there are companies that do things *better*. What we're trying to do is find, forage, and work on behalf of those who really are innovative—but also those who perform and execute better. So far, we've been received with open arms. I work with a number of government partners who are very interested and want to refocus on the mission. But they are stymied by a risk-averse environment that's resistant to change, and it's impossible for innovation to grow if you're not allowed to test and try. Something “innovative”—whether it's a process, product, or service—may not work on the first try. You have to nurture innovation and be committed to it. Innovation requires open and honest communication—not an overly punitive environment, but an environment that allows mistakes. There will always be mistakes. The point is, do you have a process in place to deal with that and get back to mission? And do you have leadership with the backbone to explain and defend the decision to try?

Q What are your top three priorities for GTSC?

The first, of course, is to keep the focus on mission. We cannot lose sight of why we do what we do. We explain to people that they are protecting the country. At the end of the day, we're talking about life or death for the heroic people working on behalf of our safety every single day. We're talking about the lives of our kids, the lives of people in an office building that's being attacked. The protection of our financial systems and, ultimately, our way of life. Whether you believe what they're doing is right or wrong, they're literally risking their lives, and that's something that we can't lose sight of. If you go to do something for the government and don't accomplish it, there are consequences. What's at stake is tremendous. The second is to serve our government partners and our members, making sure that we establish the responsible, ethical, open relationship that should exist between the public and private sectors. The third is to continue being a voice for innovation. It's about foraging for companies and establishing relationships with other organizations that care about the security of the country.

The government has a mission—and it's a different mindset. It's the mindset of protecting our people, assets, critical infrastructure, economy, and our nation. Balancing how you spend defense and homeland security dollars and making sure that we're protected while at the same time being smart and vigilant is an immense task. And our government is working very hard to balance protecting people while maintaining freedoms and privacy. The responsibilities are huge.

Q How is GTSC combating pressing challenges like cybersecurity and protecting critical infrastructure?

We have focused on cybersecurity since our inception, and that's why we created our capacity-building side that reiterates, wherever possible, that every company is responsible for ensuring that they're not the weakest link. When they look at their security as part of the supply chain to their federal clients, we think they have a higher calling and a higher responsibility to ensure that their systems are protected as well as possible. Right now, however, no one can define what “cybersecurity” means on the ground. Until we can answer, “When is my company cybersecure?”—which right now is never—it is difficult to tell companies definitively what to do or how much to spend.

Our companies are working directly with the highest homeland and national security agencies in the world, and they are vulnerable. We're all vulnerable. The bottom line is: The public and private sector must be on the same “side” when countering these attacks. If you're working in homeland and national security, you need to have a cybersecurity plan—an insider threat plan. And the government has to figure out how to share actionable, timely, useful information with its industry partners. It's an ever-changing challenge, and that's why it's so important for government and industry to work together.

Protecting privacy and proprietary information poses incredible challenges to information sharing. Some of the challenges are real while others are red herrings. Criminals, hackers, pedophiles, and nation states are playing on our fears and employing our laws—or perhaps our lack of laws—to distract us from protecting our country's cyber assets. While we argue, they steal millions, exploit our children, and thwart our foreign policy. Our officials know the law inside and out, and they all work closely to ensure that everything they do is legal and in protection of the country. That's where their hearts are, so you don't have to talk to them about mission. The folks on the front lines know exactly what their mission is. They just have a lot fighting against them.

Q The Digital Accountability and Transparency Act (DATA Act) presents a sizeable undertaking for federal agencies. What stands in the way of successful adoption?

One of the biggest challenges is inertia from failed projects and failing to connect the importance or the “why” with these big programs. You need to help everyone understand that if this is effective and you're more efficient with your data, your life will be a lot easier. If they can implement the DATA Act to be what it aspires to be, it would be a tremendous improvement. We'd be able to manage money, the budget, and projects

much better than we do now, but it is an enormous undertaking because it's government-wide. Management has to be a constant cheerleader and help employees understand that this might be painful but, in the end, we're going to have a system that's more manageable and we'll be better off for it.

Q Since founding GTSC in 2011, what are the most impactful changes you've seen?

I think our biggest success is that so many of our government partners are now reaching out to us saying, "We'd really like to do this project. We'd like to forward the ball in this area." And they're coming to us because we'll actually do it. We won't take two and a half years with committees and papers to teach them what they already knew five or 10 years ago. Right now, it's not that the process is broken, it just needs an update—*today*. Government is grappling with, "How do we keep up with rapidly advancing technology? How do we use some of the new social media? How do we implement new processes and technologies to get through procurements faster?" GTSC has been working on improved market research and communication between government and industry. We've been working on how the government can more effectively use social media. It's facing the same inertia that every one of us has when learning how to use new technology—but on a scale much larger than our own attitudes. It's moving mountains.

We're also trying to motivate employees and raise morale. I call myself a cheerleader because GTSC created awards programs to recognize people who have really moved the ball forward, turned programs around, made things better. And we give them awards because, frankly, they deserve it. GTSC wants to encourage positive reinforcement. It's about integrity and ethics and behaving well. The vibe that you send out attracts the same type of people, so hopefully our vibe is that it's all about the mission and we attract people who want to roll up their sleeves and get this done. I can't see separating what you're doing for the country from your business—not where we work. We live and breathe homeland and national security, so how can you separate what you're doing from the fact that you are literally protecting your own children, your own family, and your own country? ■

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About GTSC

The Government Technology & Services Coalition (GTSC) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan association of innovative, agile small and mid-sized company CEOs that create, develop, and implement solutions for the federal homeland and national security sector. These companies founded the Coalition to band together to work with their federal partners to achieve their mission despite significant budget challenges by bringing the innovation, creativity, and exceptionalism of successful small businesses to the homeland and national security mission. These CEOs—many former government officials—joined together to share best practices, information, and resources to lead the initiatives and solutions that would bring the best of the community together to protect the federal homeland.

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