March 18, 2015, 12:12 PM ET

Hot Tech Startup Is…Uncle Sam!

By Thomas H. Davenport

I've been hearing interesting rumors about a hot new tech services startup—on the East Coast for a change. In fact, it's in Washington, D.C., and it's financed by really deep pockets—the U.S. government budget. Your national government may have had some problems with IT in the past—a range of disasters come to mind—but now the U.S .seems to have some of the best IT people in the country.

The IT excitement in the capital started with two people—one a technologist himself, one not so much. The non-tech guy was Barack Obama, who for some reason deduced that information technology and analytics were key to the success of first his campaign, and then his administration. There doesn't seem to be much in Mr. Obama's background that would predict strong advocacy of IT and data, but somehow it emerged. I don't know how hands-on Mr. Obama is with regard to technology—probably not very much—but he seems to have been a strong champion for the role of IT in government.

Brendan Smialowski/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images
The US flag flying over the White House Jan. 26, 2015 in Washington DC.

The other prime mover was Aneesh Chopra, a tech-oriented executive who came out of Virginia. Mr. Obama appointed him the first chief technology officer of the U.S. in 2009, and he served until the end of Mr. Obama's first term. Together with Vivek Kundra, the nation's first CIO, the IT ship of state began a slow turnaround. They laid the foundation for a more open approach to technology-enabled innovation, helped to create the standards for government-subsidized electronic health records, and focused particularly on systems for veterans' health. Mr. Chopra also helped to drive the creation of open data resources from government data, and now the

Data.gov site has about 125,000 data sets that are publicly available for free. Chopra has written a book about the role of IT-driven innovation in health care called *Innovation State*.

Chopra, supported by Mr. Obama, began to bring a new type of IT leader into the government—entrepreneurial, accomplished in the private sector, and with a strong drive to innovation. One key hire was Todd Park, who had co-founded Athena Health and Castlight Health, who became the CTO of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. When Mr. Chopra departed his role as CTO of the U.S., Mr. Park became the second incumbent. Given his entrepreneurial background, Mr. Park had a strong focus on bringing "lean startup" methods to government IT. He helped to start a new program called the Presidential Innovation Fellows, which brought people from outside government into partnerships with innovative people and programs within government.

Mr. Park and some of his colleagues in the U.S. government felt that one thing lacking in government was a cadre of high-performing tech workers (in part because of the stumbles by contractors on Healthcare.gov). So they started a couple of programs that have been successful in attracting bright young people to tech roles in the government. The U.S. Digital Service, part of the executive branch in the White House, hires high-achieving tech developers to build applications for different agencies within the branch. 18F—which sounds like a secret CIA organization—is actually an elite branch of the General Services Administration that builds digital and web apps for a variety of government agencies.

The most recent star hire in the U.S. government is DJ Patil, a prominent data scientist. In fact he is arguably the most prominent data scientist in the U.S. and possibly the world, as he was appointed the first Chief Data Scientist of the US of A. Patil, who co-authored an article with me that described data scientists as "the sexiest job of the 21st century," previously helped to create the data science function at LinkedIn Corp. and headed product development at RelateIQ, which was bought by Salesforce.com Inc. Mr. Patil is focusing on a few priorities in his job, including the "precision medicine" initiative in health care, and benefits for veterans. I think it's great that one of the leading data scientists in the world has decided to take his skills to the national government, at least for a while.

One big question for me is whether these impressive initiatives will continue in the next administration. I have always believed that leadership is critical to digital and analytical initiatives. So what happens after Mr. Obama leaves? Hillary Clinton doesn't seem to be a strong proponent of tech. No Republican candidate thus far has demonstrated much interest in these matters. Eric Cantor, the former House majority leader for the Republicans, was a tech innovator, but he's left Congress and moved to Wall Street. I fear that no one will take up the technology innovation banner. The good news is that we wouldn't have expected it of Mr. Obama either. So maybe lightning will strike twice.

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