

by [Mark Funkhouser](#) | October 25, 2012

For anyone who's ever stood in line at the DMV, the idea that government can be innovative might seem laughable. But of course innovation does happen in government--quite a lot of it, as the Kennedy School's [innovations awards program](#) documents. Now we're seeing the beginning of a movement to try to institutionalize innovation in state and local government. The people in the forefront of this movement just might be on to something.

One of those in that forefront is the peerless Tony Parham, [the government innovation officer](#) for the commonwealth of Massachusetts. I say "peerless" because, at the moment, Parham seems to be the only person in any of the state governments who is the designated person in charge of government-wide innovation. Previously Bryan Sivak was the chief innovation officer for the state of Maryland, but he has gone on to serve as the chief technology officer for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. A few cities have people serving in roles similar to that of a chief innovation officer, including Boston, whose "urban mechanics," Nigel Jacobs and Chris Osgood, were recognized last year by *Governing* as [Public Officials of the Year](#).

The concept of a chief innovation officer (sometimes referred to as a CINO to distinguish the position from that of chief information officer), comes from the business community, where it was developed in the late 1990s. The idea is that this person manages the innovation process within the company, looking for new opportunities, new strategies and new business partners. Since the idea originated in business, it's perhaps not surprising that America's quintessential businessman/mayor, New York City's Michael Bloomberg, is putting his considerable wealth and acumen toward making it happen in local government with a five-city, \$24 million ["Innovation Delivery Team" initiative](#) launched by his Bloomberg Philanthropies.

Still, the idea that an organization could organize itself to be creative or innovative might strike some as odd. Being innovative seems a bit like being creative or smart: It just happens--or not. So how does an organization institutionalize the creation and execution of good ideas? Parham says there is "an innovation management process" that an organization can follow that will create an environment in which good ideas will flow and in which action will be taken on the right ones. While Parham holds degrees in computer science (as well as master's degree in management), he does not see his role in Massachusetts as that of a technologist but rather as a business person who is tech-savvy. He says the key to making this work within the organization is to be able to respond to and catalyze interpersonal relations. The soft stuff--dealing with people--is actually the hard stuff.

This idea--that innovation can be woven into the fabric of government--couldn't be more in tune with the times, with the twin forces of recession and global competition pressuring governments as never before. Innovative governments are going to adapt better to these pressures than those that try to continue to do business as they always have. Businesses and residents--and the tax base they represent--have never been more mobile. Governments that do not provide the environment their "customers" want, and at attractive prices, will lose them in ways that would have been inconceivable a decade ago. As David Birdsall, dean of the School of Public Affairs at the City University of New York's Baruch College, put it to me recently, the present debate about

bigger or smaller government is beside the point--the real issue is how to make government more flexible and adaptable.

In his 1962 book "[Diffusion of Innovations](#)," Everett Rogers wrote that an innovation "presents an individual with a new alternative or alternatives, with new means of solving problems." The critical point here is that if there is no problem, there is no innovation. Your aggravation at having to stand in the DMV line is no longer just your problem. In today's world it is becoming a problem for your state government as well, and one that it cannot solve simply by throwing more money at it. Only governments that institutionalize methods of developing innovative solutions to those problems will be able to retain the residents and the businesses that they need to thrive.



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