

## Michelle Williams

*The DPSA's new deputy director general shares her views on what it will take to connect government departments and services across the country in the next few years.*

# A passion for progress

**A**sked about the roll-out of government's ICT plan, Michelle Williams laughs "Plan? What plan?"

While an ICT plan for government is high on her agenda, Williams says that she has identified a number of strategic priorities around which she has begun to structure the work of the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO).

These priorities include initiatives to:

- Strengthen governance and accountability;
- Consolidate and transform IT infrastructure and applications to promote coherence, standardisation, eliminate duplication and create value for money;
- Develop a Service Management Improvement Plan and, in so doing optimise ICT infrastructure, improve productivity, improve security and reduce costs;

- Modernise public service operations through documenting simplifying and automating business processes – next generation e-government;

- Develop an Information Management Programme that promotes responsible stewardship of government information assets, ensures access to information and protects the citizens right to privacy; and

- Increase citizen participation and engagement.

Since her appointment in October 2007 as deputy director-general of the Department of Public Service and Administration, Williams has been promoting the need for an IT plan to support government service delivery priorities.

According to Williams, IT services must support the fundamental requirement of government for good public administration and continual improvement in the cost,

quality, access, responsiveness and speed of service delivery.

She says that she is not convinced that the institutional arrangements that govern IT in the public sector, namely the OGCIO, Government IT Officer (GITO) Council and the State IT Agency (SITA) are efficient or aligned in a manner that meets the IT requirements of government, optimises IT infrastructure, improves productivity, improves security and reduce costs.

According to Williams, a key challenge is to foster the alignment, develop a roadmap, key milestones and mechanisms by which the public service adopts a coherent enterprise wide approach to IT infrastructure and service delivery.

### SITA's role

SITA was established 10 years ago and has a mandate to do a variety of things, including the provision of IT services to various government

departments. "At the outset, staff were taken over from the departments and incorporated into SITA, with the purpose of taking over the IT of all departments," says Williams. "However, SITA struggled to maintain the quality of the services, so the model collapsed and the departments went back to making use of in-house support."

At present many of the functions of SITA are duplicated across the departments, and some departments are more open to the idea of change than others.

"It depends on the management of the department," says Williams. "Those that are responsive to the role of ICT in service delivery are more willing to consider suggestions than the others."

The major challenge, Williams believes, is to map the core infrastructure and services that are common between the departments, as well as to identify what is peculiar (specific line of business applications) to each department.

She feels that there is much that can be delivered via a shared service platform which resides in SITA while additional resources provide specific support at a departmental level.

She would like to see a model implemented that combines centralised, decentralised and shared services across all departments.

Line of business applications are typically decentralised, ERP transversal applications like BAS and PERSAL that are delivered through a shared network, data centre management and hosting model

"We are not working very smartly at the moment," she says. "DPSA has nine people providing support

## Past, present & future

Appointed in October 2007 as deputy director-general of the Department of Public Service and Administration, Williams is pint-sized but has impressive qualifications.

Her MBA from Bond University is backed up by a Master of Arts in Development Studies, a BA Hons in African Studies from UCT, and a BA History and Economic History from the University of Natal.

Williams is a member of the State Information and Technology Agency (SITA) board of directors and holds the position of vice chair of the SITA board.

As Government's Chief Information Officer and head of the Office of the Government Chief Information Office (OGCIO) Williams is mandated to work with the Government Information Technology Officer Council to promote and manage the use of ICT in the design and delivery of citizen-centred services, and to ensure that the operations of the public service are aligned, secure, efficient and cost effective.

Prior to the DPSA, Williams spent seven years with the Department of Communications, and four years with Siemens. Within Siemens she held the position of Programme Director: World Cup 2010, responsible for coordinating the company's portfolio on major event infrastructure across most of the business units. Her responsibilities included ICT and communications, building technologies, airports, transportation systems, medical facilities and power.

for around 350 users; the industry standard is one support person to around 140 users."

She adds: "The service delivery model for LAN and desktop support is one example of a lack of standardisation and coherence in the provisioning of IT in government. We are not leveraging economies of scale in this and many other areas."

Williams acknowledges that not everything can be included in a shared

environment, but maintains that there are a number of programmes that can be centralised.

"Email is one of them," she says, "as is the government's Basic Accounting System (BAS). BAS is already centralised and none of the departments question the use of SITA support for it. What they do complain about is the quality of service and the pricing of SITA services."

SITA supposedly has a captive market. “There are rules and mechanisms in place to force the departments to make use of SITA’s services,” says Williams. “However, they mostly consider buying from SITA a grudge purchase and if they can find a way to bypass the agency, they will do so.”

SITA is not competitive with other suppliers in terms of price either, and this is one of the areas Williams believes needs thorough investigation.

Williams recounts the story of a government department sourcing quotations for a laptop, which was available from an external vendor at two thirds of the price offered by SITA. “But we can’t deal in anecdotal evidence,” she says.

In order to provide a constructive basis for engagement with these

service; and review of ICT expenditure in the public service. These reviews are being undertaken to identify opportunities for better management and governance, improved efficiencies and the opportunities for better economies of scale through a shared services model where possible.

And in terms of governance? “It’s nowhere near what it should be,” she says. “At first glance, the control measures look all right, but we have no benchmark to compare against and when one digs deeper, it becomes apparent they are not up to scratch.”

Security issues have recently come under the spotlight, and this has resulted in an investigation of the processes in place. According to Williams, the various departments have very different security require-

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concerns, the GCIO has initiated comprehensive performance review of SITA’s operations including, but not limited to benchmarking on its pricing and the quality of services it provides to government departments. A steering committee has been established to manage the review and will include the GITO Council, SITA and the OGCIO.

The GCIO has also initiated a review of call centres in the public

ments and often 140 different departments and individuals will all be doing different things.

“We are revising the security governance framework and developing a security blueprint for the departments,” she says.

“Some departments are easily able to comply with the minimum ISO 17799 standards, but others are struggling and must be assisted to attain compliance.”

### SITA Challenges

The main challenge Williams has encountered in trying to get her initiatives adopted within SITA has been resistance to change.

“First,” she says, “we need to design a shared services model that works. Then we need to convince SITA to build the capability for the model, in an environment which has been neglected for far too long.”

She says the skepticism about SITA’s ability to deliver is understandable, but believes that if a way can be found to meet the needs of the majority of the departments in a cost effective manner, this will help to improve confidence in the users and they will be more likely to take ownership.

### A three year strategy for SITA

Williams has been instrumental in the development of a three year corporate strategy for SITA, with the purpose of refocusing SITA on service delivery to its clients.

Seven strategic imperatives have been identified, all with key initiatives that need to be operationalised. The seven priorities are:

- Infrastructure optimisation,
- Modernisation of public service operations,
- Develop its people,
- Achieve operational excellence;
- Reduce costs;
- Extend service footprint; and
- Financial sustainability.

The plan is ambitious, Williams admits, and she agrees that it will require much facilitation to get all parties involved around the table.

Speaking on the issue of the next generation e-government initiative, Williams says there has been excellent

co-operation in the short space of time in which she has been working on the project.

“We have had many engagements with local and provincial government departments so far, and it hasn’t been all resistance,” she smiles.

“We have gone out for tenders to build a next generation e-government prototype to test the e-enablement of six services. This prototype will form a basis on which we can evolve and make e-government a reality.”

### A working example

The IT plan for government may still be in the making, but what Williams does have, is a vision of a future in which service centres, schools, health services, clinics and other government departments across South Africa are connected via a shared infrastructure, supported by SITA.

Williams tells of the strategy for the Thusong service centres (TSCs), currently being implemented, with emotion in her voice. “The Thusong centres comprise 123 government service centres in rural and remote areas,” she says. “For most of the years they have been in existence, few have even had a telephone.”

The OGCIO, together with SITA, the Department of Communications (DoC) and the GCIS, has developed an ICT blue print to support connectivity for these TSCs. This will allow departments to use a shared infrastructure to connect to their systems and provide services. The model also provides for IT support using a central help desk and remote access.

The Inhlazuke service centre just outside Richmond in KZN received a data line that was launched on 7 June, connecting its back office systems.

The centre still has no telephone, but through internet access and the data line the first birth certificate ever printed in the area has now been produced.

“That’s powerful progress,” says Williams. “Can you imagine what that capability will mean for the community in terms of access to services and hopefully the speed and quality of service delivery?”

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Her aim is for the centre to have telephone and email very shortly.

In terms of the roll-out, 50% of the Thusong centres will be connected by September 2008 and the balance by the end of March 2009.

### The bigger picture

The next phase will be an Edunet, says Williams, who envisages connectivity for all government schools around the country, using the SITA backbone and support.

“There are already initiatives in progress in Gauteng and the Western Cape to provide infrastructure to schools,” she says, “with the Department of Education and other role players such as the Department of Communications and the DPSA all working together with agencies like Sentech, Telkom, and SITA to provide the infrastructure.

Williams also foresees similar

challenges in respect of health services and clinics. The connectivity, according to her, is the easy part – it’s the content and support that are more difficult to put in place.

“The investment in the core network has already been made, as the government is placing a lot of emphasis on ICT,” says Williams. “I think it’s entirely possible to bring the agencies and institutions onto the

backbone and have 100% connectivity within two to three years.”

### It’s all about the people

Williams says she has amazing support from Geraldine Fraser-Moloketi, the Minister for Public Service and Administration, but the bureaucracy of government means that there are processes that must be followed.

“It’s an honour to be part of the Minister’s team,” she says, “but I’m long past trying to be superwoman. It’s teams that deliver, not individuals, and the quality of the team will determine whether or not we are successful.”

If it has anything to do with Michelle Williams, however, South Africa’s government departments will soon be dragged – kicking and screaming if necessary – right into the information age. ■