

## Innovation Meets Resistance from Entrenched Bureaucrats

Written by Nick Sanders  
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“When leaders say they want innovation, what they want is spiral development and predictable forward progress. They don’t want disruptive innovation that upsets the status quo and puts jobs at risk.”

We [wrote](#) that more than a year ago, in discussing why the Pentagon was never going to get the innovative technology it says it wants. In that same article, we also wrote—

Disruptive innovation is the result of a vision plus hard development work, and the Pentagon doesn’t fund that type of effort much anymore. Disruptive innovation gets in the way of carefully managed, centrally planned, incremental improvements. Nobody wants to sponsor a wild hair idea that may, or may not, end up working out. While innovators seek to ‘fail faster’ the current Pentagon mantra is ‘failure is not an option.’ Thus, disruptive innovation has no patrons and has to fight a difficult battle against the forces that defend the status quo.

Further to those year-old thoughts, let us offer two pieces of evidence in support of our assertions.

First, follow [this link](#) to an article on TechWire, written by Jason Shueh, which discusses the problems faced by the 18F group at the GSA. For those readers who may be unfamiliar with the 18F group, it is [described](#) as “an office inside the General Services Administration that helps other federal agencies build, buy, and share efficient and easy-to-use digital services.” Started in 2014, after the debacle of healthcare.gov, 18F was supposed to bring disruptive technology solutions to the Federal government. Eleven of the first 15 employees of the group were Presidential Innovation Fellows, staffed from both government and industry.

Back to the TechWire article –

Multiple sources connected to 18F report that the group of former Silicon Valley tech innovators — that helps agencies buy, build and share technology — is grappling with opposition from GSA’s Federal Acquisition Service (FAS), the division managing funding for 18F. Speaking on the condition of anonymity, an authority inside 18F reported that FAS has on multiple

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occasions sought to defund the program due to some of its private-sector tactics, charging that while 18F strives to improve government purchasing and technology development, the group is also disrupting traditional procedures.

The article continued –

[Former GSA Administrator] Tangherlini said his worry for 18F, and innovation programs like it, is that the federal government's risk-averse nature, and proclivity for tradition, will discourage top talent from entering civil service. The roster at 18F — and the U.S. Digital Service, its sister organization, that offers IT consulting in teams at the White House and agencies — boasts expertise from Google, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and a host of other leading tech companies. The allure for these technologists to enter government isn't a federal salary they could easily surpass in the private sector. The willingness comes from an ambition — as idealistic as it might sound — to enhance and rethink the systems and tools used by government to serve citizens.

Another [article](#) about 18F, this time from GovernmentTechnology (also written by Jason Shueh), reported more of the details regarding the “tension” between 18F and the entrenched GSA FAS bureaucracy. It stated—

Externally, 18F is defending itself from IT lobbyists, representing companies like IBM, Deloitte, Cisco Systems and others, that allege 18F is hindering revenues as a competing government tech provider — a message they shared at a recent hearing evaluating 18F's effectiveness. Internally, the group has met resistance from CIOs unsure of its private-sector development practices, and within the General Services Administration (GSA), 18F's parent agency, insiders say that the Federal Acquisition Service (FAS) that funds 18F is actively working to terminate the group. The sources report that 18F's procurement work to break down IT contracts into smaller pieces has compelled FAS to act. They allege that FAS leadership fears shorter-term IT contracts at more competitive prices would decrease the revenues the organization receives from agencies via contract service fees and other FAS procurement vehicles.

In summary, the entrenched bureaucracy at GSA's FAS group seems to be afraid of a government that works better and costs less (at least for technology projects) and is doing what it can to stifle disruptive innovation. The bureaucracy seems to be aided and abetted in its efforts by the “traditional” IT consulting firms, who stand to make bank by following the traditional Federal IT project approach of late deliveries, broken budgets, and unmet

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requirements. (A hat tip to Bob Antonio's WIFCON site for pointing us to the 18F controversy.)

In related news, our second piece of evidence in support of our assertions concerns a [recent report](#) from the DOD Office of Inspector General. The DOD OIG report concerned the Advanced Arresting Gear (AAG) program, a Major Defense Acquisition Program (MDAP) managed by the U.S. Navy. According to the DOD OIG, the program is behind schedule and in an overrun position.

What's the root cause of the programs problems?

The DOD OIG states the fundamental problem is "the Navy pursued a technological solution for its Ford-class carriers that was not sufficiently mature for the planned use, resulting in hardware failures to mechanical and electrical components, and software modifications to accommodate these failures."

Yes, you read that correctly. According to the IG, the Navy's problem was that it tried to innovate with insufficiently mature technology. Apparently, innovation should only be pursued with mature technology, technology that has been proven. The fact that this is a logical impossibility apparently escaped the DOD IG.

So there you have it, folks. Two anecdotes. Two pieces of evidence (plus the recent update article on the Palantir vs. DCGS fight) that support our pessimism regarding the Federal government's ability to innovate and to facilitate innovation by its contractors.

Oh, how we wish we were wrong about this.