

UMUC Business and Executive Programs Podcasts
Executive CIO Education in Global World

Interviewer: Pat Spencer

Interviewee: Barry West

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Spencer: Welcome to Executive CIO Education in the Global World – a weekly podcast that features highlights of the Executive Chief Information Officer program and discussion of how the program prepares executives for technology leadership in today’s global business environment. I’m Pat Spencer, Manager of the Executive Program’s Online Team Coaching Program, your host for the day.

Our guest today is Barry West, Executive Vice President, SE Solutions. Barry was the first UMUC CIO Certificate Program graduate to be appointed as a Federal CIO.

The topic for today’s show is Experience in the Federal Government. We will be discussing how this Certificate Program helps prospective Chief Information Officers within the Federal Government better leverage technology strategically to create competitive advantage for their agencies. Barry, why might someone in the Federal Government find value in earning the CIO Certificate?

West: Well, Pat, I think it gives folks a better perspective on the various roles and responsibilities of a CIO. And I know when I went through the program it really made me step back and take a real holistic view of the role of the CIO. It also allowed me to strengthen some of the weaker areas I had. I had been an IT person all my career, actually starting out in the late ‘70s and knew that I wanted to keep growing in that field. But the CIO Certificate Program allowed me to really take a step back and focus on some of the areas that maybe I wasn’t as strong in as certain other areas. So from that perspective it was very good. And it also gave me a credential, a credential that could be added to my resume as I went out to seek specific job opportunities in this area. They were really the main areas that helped me and that would help a government person right now looking at the program.

Spencer: Those are good concrete examples, thanks. Would you tell us how the CIO Certificate Program can assist government-based CIOs and other IT professionals?

West: Yes. It really touches on all of the core competencies of the Clinger-Cohen Act of 1996. Clinger-Cohen Act was created to create the actual CIO position. That act created the position by Congress and it mandated each government agency to have a CIO position. Many people have heard of CFO and COO, this was a CIO, Chief Information Officer, created to create the top IT person in your organization. So it really, from that perspective, the program itself hits on all of the competency areas that were established when the Clinger-Cohen Act and the CIO position were created.

The other thing is the networking perspective. While going through the program you meet other students in your same area of expertise and it allows you to further network with those folks in your careers. And the network is an area that a lot of folks don’t think about or they lose perspective on, but it’s very important to keep your network open because that’s how you really meet people, you learn about new positions, you gain insight into areas that you may not know about, so I can’t really emphasize the networking enough, Pat. It’s one of those things that’s

really not documented real well when you go through a program like this, but it really plays a key role.

The other thing is the confidence builder. As you go through this program and you complete it, you then come out with a CIO Certificate, both from the University of Maryland University College and recognized by the General Services Administration, GSA, and the Federal CIO Council within the government. So having that designation on your resume, really, I think, sparks some confidence. You know that you went through the program, you completed it, you passed it and it really gives you that confidence builder to tackle some of the nuances and some of the new challenges that you may face as a CIO.

Spencer: Earning the CIO Certificate really does open up vast additional possibilities for folks who complete it. Now that you have finished the CIO Certificate Program, how did this experience help you network with other professionals. You spoke about that briefly a couple of minutes ago, but could you give us some specifics?

West: I went through the program in 2001, so it's been eight years now. I think I was in class number two at the time, and I'm still keeping in touch with some of those same students. We've created a network. I'm on Facebook, some of the other Web 2.0 tools that are out there, LinkedIn. I know Steve Knode has created also a CIO webpage as well. That networking has carried on, a lot of it from this CIO Certificate experience, and that really helped. When I say networking, both other Federal Government folks and private sector individuals. And helping them move in and out because you'll see that happen a lot too in the IT field, is folks move from the government to industry and from industry to the government. So from that perspective it's really helped keep my network open. When I come across issues in a particular company or a government agency, if I'm trying to market to that agency or if I need to get expertise from a specific company and some of these individuals are with that company, it gives me a leg up in trying to make contact and getting issues resolved. From the people I met in the class to the confidence level of actually completing the Certificate Program in my field was just – I couldn't speak enough about it, Pat. It just helped immensely my career.

Spencer: It sounds as if your initial community really did give you a jumping off point to continually expand your community of CIO people. What are the key skills you enhanced because of your participation in this program?

West: Well, the ones that come to mind when I look back are some of the various seminar areas that were established for the program. They included program and project management, emerging technologies, strategic planning, IT security, but it also helped with things such as communications, being able to do public speaking, enhancing the public speaking portion, because as a CIO, you're almost a salesperson, if you will. I mean you're in charge of all the IT for an organization, but you really have to be a good salesperson and a good communicator and a good writer and the program definitely helped with that.

Also, working in groups. A program much like the graduate level degree programs, you work in a collaborative environment, you work in assigned groups and that really helped quite a bit, in forcing you to work with a group and tackle a lot of the challenges and working with group members.

Spencer: And folks who sign up for the certificate might not otherwise think about the value of better communication, the ability to work in groups and that really is an important part of the program.

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West: It is, it is.

Spencer: How long did it take you to complete the program?

West: Pat, it was a one-year program and that worked out real well. I know some of the other programs I've seen vary from one year to 18 months. The University of Maryland University College CIO Certificate Program was one year at the time when I went through the program.

Spencer: Let's talk about time management next. How did you successfully manage to complete the program while working fulltime and also juggling additional responsibilities associated with your family life?

West: Well, first off you need to have an understanding family and you need to set the expectation up front, because this is going to require a lot of time and dedication and you almost have to sacrifice some things that you normally would do for recreation or as an outlet. You have to sacrifice some of those over the time period of the program. They have to realize what you're about to undertake, that being your family, just like with any graduate program where someone is working fulltime. It really comes down to a balancing act, Pat, of balancing time with your family, work, and yourself. And the program, when I look back, people say, well, you know, you really had to sacrifice a lot to go through that. It was every bit worth of the time and sacrifice. And my family, if you were to ask them – in fact I was talking with my wife about it this morning – she says that program – I remember when you did that and it really did help, it helped immensely and even though we had to sacrifice some things, it was worth it. So I think students, especially prospective students, need to think about that balancing act and alerting the family up front to what they're going to undertake.

Spencer: Well, you've given folks something to think back on and provided some encouragement for those who are currently in the program and who will be in the program. Why isn't the certificate a requirement for all government CIOs?

West: Well, it's actually been fully embraced by the General Services Administration, GSA, as I mentioned earlier, they actually present a certificate. When you complete the program they actually provide a certificate that's blessed by the Federal CIO Council. But it's really tough to mandate something like this in the Federal Government. It would almost be like all CFOs have to have CPA. It's really, really tough to make something like that a requirement. So what it is, it's highly encouraged at this time. I think as the program is advertised and people go through it, it can only help someone as they apply to become a CIO.

Spencer: Thank you. And finally, what other benefits can you identify?

West: Well, this program can actually be used towards a Masters Degree in Information Technology by completing a few additional courses, which I actually did. I had already had a Masters Degree coming into the program, went through the Certificate Program and realized I was very close to earning a second Masters and the particular Masters I got was a Master of Science in Information Technology. And I think it took me an additional four months or so, went through an additional seminar and went ahead and did that. And looking back on that as well, that gave me an added credential of having two Master's degrees as I competed for jobs in the Federal Government. I think it gave me a leg up. So that, I think, is a really key point and an added benefit is that the programs are aligned with additional Master's degrees.

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Spencer: And that's not always something that someone might originally strive for, but when you are that close, it makes it much easier to finish.

West: Yes, you're already in the mode, if you will, it made it a lot easier just to carry on and finish.

Spencer: Thank you so much for all of this good information. This is Pat Spencer and I'd like to thank Barry West for helping us understand how earning a Chief Information Officer Certificate can benefit government workers; and, most of all, its importance to the Federal Government. Thank you, listeners, for joining Executive Education in the Global World.

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