Eric Beck Nomination for IT Manager of the Year

Eric Beck manages Information Technology at the Idaho Department of Labor. Labor's IT Bureau consists of approximately 65 staff serving the central office and 25 local offices throughout Idaho and has been a pioneer in such areas as web-based services, voice over IP communications, cloud computing and other technologies. The department began using automation extensively in the 1970s. In the past Labor played a key role in the creation and operation of the state's wide area network known as IDANet and is currently running the state's pilot on cloud computing.

The Department of Labor's operation is highly automated with almost all services provided via Internet-based systems. Labor is also a member of a four-state consortium charged with designing a multistate unemployment insurance benefit and tax system. The other three states in the consortium are Arizona, North Dakota and Wyoming. The consortium is named AWIN after the first letter in the name of each state. Eric Beck is the project manager for AWIN, and Idaho is the lead state.

The AWIN project has involved 150 people from all four states. They represent the unemployment insurance program and IT experts from each state. The consortium is in the process of finalizing approximately 200 use cases and is working on a technical IT architecture for the system. The complexity of this effort cannot be overstated. The diverse personalities involved and the divergent needs and interests of each state and the federal government make managing this project formidable. The project, started in September of 2009 and to be completed in September of 2011, is funded by an $18 million federal grant.

Eric's role as project manager is obviously critical to the success of AWIN. He has kept the states working together while ensuring that the federal partner, the U.S. Department of Labor, remains informed and supportive. There has also been pressure to keep non-consortium states informed of the project's progress. Keeping all these parties happy while also keeping the project on course has been an incredible accomplishment by Eric.

The importance of this project to the people of Idaho and to the United States generally is huge. The Idaho Department of Labor's current unemployment insurance benefit system is 25 years old. It's tax system is 35 years old. These systems are mainframe based and use technology originated in the 1950s and 1960s. They are complex, rigid and becoming increasingly difficult to maintain and almost impossible to enhance. These systems will eventually fail. It is only a question of when. Both systems required extensive and expensive efforts to construct. The benefit system was originally imported from the state of West Virginia and took over a decade to adapt to Idaho. That adaptation included fixing a host of problems inherent in the imported system. Eric participated extensively in that effort. That experience is a one reason he has been so successful with the AWIN project. Last year the benefit system paid $624 million in benefits no larger than $336 per claimant per week. Failure of this system would obviously have a major impact on Idaho's economy.

From a national perspective, the U.S. Department of Labor calculated that it would take approximately $75 million per state to resolve the issue of old unemployment insurance systems in America. Obviously

the total cost of the individual state approach is prohibitive. A consortium of states is the alternative solution. There are two consortiums currently operating—AWIN and another in the southeastern United States. A lot more than Idaho's future unemployment insurance operation is thus dependent on the success of the AWIN project.

Eric has been traveling among the four states and Washington, D.C. almost constantly since the AWIN project began. He has worked tirelessly to keep everyone informed and connected. His dedication to the project and the personal sacrifice he has endured as a result of that dedication are simply inspirational. But results are what counts, and Eric has definitely managed to get results. As we approach the end of the project in September, it is clear that we will have a good design and framework within which to begin construction of the AWIN system. The department's exploration of cloud computing should also prove useful for AWIN. Hopefully the cloud can be used to help transform the AWIN Consortium's four state solution into a national solution.

Throughout his career Eric has led the department's IT efforts into new and challenging technologies. The return on investment of those efforts has enabled Labor to not only withstand decades of budget cuts but also to greatly improve service delivery.   He has done the same for the state by leading efforts such as the creation and operation of IDANet as well as the current cloud computing pilot. He was a member of ITRMC in the early years when it began establishing information technology standards for the state. During his 30 year career at the department, Eric advanced his education by earning both his bachelor's and master's degrees. At the same time his expertise in information technology has remained unsurpassed, and he is without question the primary IT leader at the Department of Labor.

Much of Eric's contribution has been behind the scenes. He has managed the department's IT operation with an eye toward maximizing staff productivity through training while challenging everyone to think outside the box. Eric's challenge is always accompanied by an assurance that we can learn from mistakes so no one should be afraid to try something new. Eric has thus managed to empower his staff to take risks when potential rewards are great. Low staff turnover and high productivity have been the result of Eric's approach. The Idaho Department of Labor and the state of Idaho have been the primary beneficiaries of his work.