Lewis Shepherd | Mind's Eye on the Future

Shepherd's team leads intel community into the future

By Jennifer Huergo   May 04, 2007

Lewis Shepherd was in graduate school at Stanford University in the 1980s when he had his first experience with the intelligence field as a Soviet affairs analyst, armed with paper documents and an IBM Selectric typewriter.

Today, as senior technical officer and chief of the Defense Intelligence Agency's requirements and research group, he not only has the latest technologies at his disposal but also is working to develop the next generation of tools.

Although his path to the Senior Executive Service as an information technology innovator was anything but direct, it did take him through Silicon Valley and San Francisco during the tech boom of the 1980s and 1990s.

Along the way, he said, he gained valuable insight into the world of venture capitalism and learned the importance of imagining the future.

After graduating from Stanford, he worked with venture capitalists and small technology firms as a senior policy adviser to the mayor of San Jose, Calif., the capital of Silicon Valley. He later served as director of communications for the mayor of San Francisco.

'Some of the smartest people I've ever met, the most brilliant, are technologists who have become venture capitalists,' Shepherd said.

New mission

In the late 1990s, Shepherd moved into the private sector, where he was exposed to the intelligence community once again through his work with a start-up company. He was eventually invited to join DIA in 2004.

Since then, Shepherd has seen the agency's IT mission change substantially. 'We now provide far more technology services, far more data, far more communications capabilities to warfighters than we ever did,' he said. The changes are largely because of the need to support troops fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq, in addition to the intelligence chiefs at U.S. military combatant commands worldwide.

Shepherd has visited nearly every command and always makes a point of speaking with analysts and warfighters, not just senior leaders, to learn about the intelligence challenges they face every day. 'Those challenges are immense, and we need to make

far better use of a lot of innovative technologies to support them,' he said.

'Lewis showed tremendous courage on the job by touring the war zone in Iraq and talking with troops on the ground,' said Peter Coddington, director of knowledge management solutions at Inxight Federal Systems, who nominated Shepherd for the IT Leadership Award. 'He's driven by the need to 'ensure the mission is accomplished and that the young men and women fighting for this country are protected and have the tools they need.'

Shepherd is leading the development of a new system that will serve intelligence needs in

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areas as disparate as the Middle East and the Korean peninsula's demilitarized zone. The All-Source Intelligence Environment, or Alien, will bring new technology and new business approaches to bear on the challenge of delivering intelligence from all sources.

Combined effort

'We're tying together all data from across the intelligence community,' Shepherd said, 'and we've done it with a lot of cutting-edge technology.'

He keeps his team on top of the latest technologies through weekly meetings that include demonstrations by experts of companies ranging from IBM to the stereotypical two-guys-in-a-garage start-up.

'He blends a unique perspective of both the private and public sectors,' said Paul Battaglia, president of Inxight Federal Systems. 'He's very mindful of his budget, and even though it's not a profit/loss situation, he treats his investments very personally and takes ownership of them. He makes no haphazard decisions."

He motivates through his excitement,' Coddington said, 'because he's excited about the potential and possibility of solving problems that haven't been solved before.'

Shepherd also believes in face-to-face interaction. He follows the management style popularized by Bill Hewlett and Dave Packard, referred to as management by walking around. 'I'm rarely at my desk,' he said. 'I'm wandering around, I visit engineers in their cubicles, I do hands-on demos in the lab.'

But with the agency's labs spread across three continents, cubicle hopping can get

tricky. So, naturally, Shepherd turned to technology for a solution, and now he and his staff increasingly rely on video-conferencing. 'It's becoming as ubiquitous as a phone call or e-mail,' he said.

He adds that he prefers to share his successes. 'A personal award like this disguises the fact that there are hundreds of people working with me on Alien and our other projects,' he said.

Career highlights

1988: Won the National Press Club Annual Authors Award for his best-selling book, 'The Captive American: How To Stop Being a Political Prisoner in Your Own Country,' co-authored with Silicon Valley businessman Lee Brandenburg. The book addresses voter apathy and political reform.

2000: Made a midcareer switch from politics to high-tech and helped create a successful company called H5 Technologies. One of his customers was the Office of Naval Intelligence, where he got to know the chief information officer, Mark Greer. The two began sharing ideas on how the intelligence community could make better use of new technology, and when Greer moved to the Defense Intelligence Agency, he invited Shepherd to 'see what it's like on the inside for a while.'

2006: Conceived the All-Source Intelligence Environment, a complex set of technologies that will integrate intelligence data from all sources.

2005: Invented Lab X, DIA's effort to provide a Web browser-based, globally accessible prototyping environment.