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FEDERAL ICON 2026

PAVAN PIDUGU

ARCHITECT OF NEXT-GEN TRANSPORTATION

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The future of government will be shaped not only by new technology, but by how well public institutions translate that technology into services people can actually trust and rely on.

As federal agencies work to modernize systems that have gone years without meaningful investment, they face a persistent challenge: technology alone rarely solves the problem. The organizations that succeed are the ones that pair new systems with the people and processes needed to make them work.

Few leaders understand that challenge as deeply as Pavan Pidugu, Chief Digital & Information Officer of the U.S. Department of Transportation. Having led technology transformation across some of the country's largest retail organizations before moving into federal service, Pidugu has built his career on a simple conviction: technology succeeds only when it is built around the people who have to use it, and the processes that surround it.

“Pavan came in and literally, within days, put a roadmap on my desk on how to modernize the agency's IT systems to be more efficient,” said Jim Mullen, FMCSA's former acting administrator, describing Pidugu's arrival at the agency. “He came in and made improvements in a very short time period that are creating safer roads, improving transportation and reducing fatalities.

For his leadership in modernizing federal technology and building public trust in government systems

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FEDERAL ICON 2026.

Q **You spent over a decade leading technology transformation at Target, NCR, and Walmart before joining the federal government. What made you make that move, and what's the throughline?**

PAVAN PIDUGU

The retail work taught me that technology only matters if it changes what a customer or an employee actually experiences. I spent years building systems at Target, NCR, and Walmart that had to prove themselves against a brutally simple test: did this make the experience better, or didn't it?

I moved into federal government because I wanted to apply that same test somewhere the stakes were higher than a checkout line. At FMCSA, the customer isn't shopping, they're a trucking company trying to stay compliant, or a state trooper trying to verify a vehicle is safe. The throughline is that I've never believed technology succeeds on its own merits. It succeeds when it's built around the people who have to use it.

Q **When you joined FMCSA, you inherited systems that hadn't been meaningfully upgraded in roughly two decades. What did that turnaround actually require?**

PAVAN PIDUGU

It required admitting that the technology wasn't really the hard part. The agency had gone twenty years without modernizing because every previous attempt had tried to fix the software without fixing how the organization worked around it. We put a roadmap together within days of my arriving, but the roadmap was never just a technology plan, it was a plan for how people would work differently once the technology changed.

We simplified how carriers register, pay fees, and request authorizations, which sounds administrative until you realize that every delay or point of confusion in that process was an opening for fraud. Fixing the process and the technology together is what actually reduced processing times and closed those openings.

Q

One of the most concrete results from your time at FMCSA was a new digital inspection platform. What did that project actually change for the people using it?

PAVAN PIDUGU

Commercial vehicle inspectors were working across eight separate legacy systems just to do one inspection. We replaced all eight with a single digital platform, and it's now used by more than fourteen thousand law enforcement officers across the country.

The result that matters most to me is the time. A roadside inspection used to take forty to fifty minutes. With the new platform, it's under twenty-five. That's not just an efficiency number, that's less time an officer and a driver spend on the shoulder of a highway, and more inspections we can actually complete to keep unsafe vehicles off the road.

As DOT's Chief Digital and Information Officer, you've talked about wanting the CIO to have a real seat at the table, rather than being seen as just network security and desktop support. What did you actually do about that?

PAVAN PIDUGU

Historically, everyone assumed the CIO's job was security, email, maybe help desk, and everyone else went off and built their own thing. I didn't want the technology office to just be a service desk, I wanted it to be a technology shop, a place that actually builds applications and products, not just supports them.

We worked with the Secretary's office to put a memo in place directing every administrator and every assistant and deputy assistant secretary that there would be no more shadow IT, one DOT IT. In the process of unifying that, we uncovered a lot of redundancy we didn't even know existed, we found something like ten to fourteen separate grant systems in a department that doesn't have fourteen sub-agencies. Consolidating that kind of duplication is where a lot of the real savings and simplification comes from.

Q **Part of your work at FMCSA involved simplifying carrier registration and putting new identity verification**

PAVAN PIDUGU

We rebuilt how carriers register, pay fees, and request authorizations so the process was simpler and more consistent, which on its own reduced processing times for legitimate carriers. Alongside that, we put new identity verification requirements in place for new applicants, an early step aimed at protecting drivers' data and helping close the door on fraudulent registrations.

The safety and the fraud-prevention pieces were never really separate problems to me. A registration system that's easy to game is also a registration system that can't reliably tell you who is actually operating on the road. I'm glad to see the agency has continued building on that foundation since.

Q **You've described your vision for the department as being about processes, people, and products, not just technology. What does that framing actually change?**

PAVAN PIDUGU

It changes where you start. If you start with the product, the system you're going to build, you end up with technology looking for a problem. If you start with the process, what actually needs to happen, and the people who have to make it happen, the technology follows naturally, and it tends to actually get used.

Products, in my framing, aren't just software, they're the actual capability a federal employee or a member of the public interacts with. If we get the process and the people right first, the product we build on top of that is far more likely to survive contact with the real world instead of becoming another system nobody adopts.

Q **You're now applying that philosophy across an entire cabinet department instead of a single agency like FMCSA. What's different about operating at that scale?**

PAVAN PIDUGU

At FMCSA, I could walk the roadmap through the entire organization myself. At the department level, the roadmap has to survive contact with a dozen different missions, aviation, highways, transit, rail, maritime, pipelines, each with its own systems, culture, and constraints.

What doesn't change is the underlying discipline: define the outcome you're trying to achieve for the people the technology serves, and build the people and process changes in alongside the technology, not after it. That discipline is part of what helped the department earn recognition with three consecutive CIO100 Awards for modernization, and I'd rather point to that kind of external validation than my own opinion of the work.

Q **Looking ahead, what will define successful digital transformation across the federal government over the next several years?**

PAVAN PIDUGU

It will be defined by whether agencies can resist the temptation to treat modernization as a one-time project instead of a permanent discipline. Technology will keep changing, AI included, but the agencies that succeed will be the ones that keep pairing every new capability with the people and process changes it demands.

I think the government agencies that earn the public's trust in the next several years will be the ones that measure success the way I try to measure it: not by how modern the technology looks, but by whether the people who depend on that agency, whether they're a trucking company, a driver, or a traveler, can feel the difference.

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