

At City Hall, a massive department is mired in chaos



by [David Kroman](#)



Outside the Seattle Municipal Tower, where the city's IT department operates Credit: [Seattle Department of Transportation](#)

Last summer, a Seattle police officer called in to say his in-car network was down. No driving or arrest records could be checked. There was no way to pull up any crisis-intervention advice. He couldn't even get a readout of emergency dispatcher's instructions.

It was a problem for the officer, but, according to one former employee, the issue improbably found its way to the head of the new Seattle Information Technology department, Michael Mattmiller — the gatekeeper to nearly every scrap of technology in the city. “So right away he writes an email with 16 different things to check,” said the former employee.

As Mattmiller and others in the tech department scrambled, one police employee found the officer who'd called it in and checked out his system. The officer, it turned out, had bumped his screen and shut his car's system off. Flipping it back on solved the problem.

“Mattmiller,” said the former employee, “got personally involved with troubleshooting the network instead of trusting the people who work for him.”

It was a small, if head-scratching, incident. But it's telling of how City Hall employees have come to view the massive IT consolidation that, over the year and a half since it officially began, has been plagued by confusion, chaos, mistrust and frustration among both its employees and its customers, the various city departments.

Seattle Information Technology — SIT, as it's known — is the most important city department you've never heard of. Transportation, City Light, Parks, Police, Fire, Construction and Development: These are the rock stars, the ones that Seattle citizens can see and touch and get angry with.

Its reach in city government is largely invisible to the city's residents, but SIT is essential to the purchasing and managing of the city's technologies. Its presence is everywhere — in traffic technology, permitting processes, police-car cameras.

It's also relatively new. In May 2015, Mayor Ed Murray announced it would be better for the city if there was one, centralized information technology department, rather than each department having its own. The idea was to create a more efficient, more fluid tech network where everyone was working off the same programs and technologies. The technology department once had about 200 employees. Now it has over 600.

That the department's head jumped on solving an officer's problem with his computer was, in City Hall terms, akin to the Fire Chief helping answer a 911 phone call.

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As Murray prepares to leave office and recounts his legacy, IT consolidation has taken its place next to his housing agenda and the \$15 minimum wage as a major accomplishment. He name-checked it in the lobby of the Paramount Theatre recently as he was endorsing Jenny Durkan to take his place.

But in interviews with a dozen current city employees — all of whom asked for anonymity because of professional unease about speaking out — as well as interviews with several former employees, the consolidation was universally panned. A recent internal survey of nearly 400 employees from SIT and the departments that rely on SIT for help — commissioned by Seattle IT and obtained by Crosscut through a public records request — echoes this sentiment, ranking both employee and customer satisfaction significantly worse than even the public's general opinion of internet service providers and fast food restaurants.

Grievances flow in from many directions — from a memo out of Seattle City Light to senior leadership of the Seattle Police Department griping openly in a courtroom recently (“Every department is upset,” one police leader said). When asked to characterize SIT as an animal as part of the survey, the customers who need SIT — i.e., people in other city departments — chose a porcupine, a rhinoceros and a sloth.

The complaints are many: There’s no transparency or trust; few understand SIT’s process; the department is slow to react; and more. On a scale of minus 100 to 100, SIT received a minus 68 from employees and customers. For context, national results using the same scale give the frequently disparaged TV service providers an average score of plus 11; health plans, 24; and airlines, 37.

“The report shows we have room for improvement, to say the least,” says Mattmiller.

The issues, in part, highlight the incredible complexity of a wholesale restructuring of an integral part of city infrastructure. It’s like the frustration of switching to a new computer, but compounded by the inertia of 12,000 city employees and with the backing of a nearly \$40 million administrative budget. As Mattmiller says repeatedly, change on this scale is very hard from a logistics standpoint, for one, and also because it requires long-time veterans of city government to alter well-ingrained habits. Further, city executives are quick to point out that the consolidation is still a work in progress — close to halfway through a three-year rollout — with plenty more time to adjust.

But that’s given little comfort to the departments that need services now.

Seattle IT has to keep both its internal employees and customers in the other departments happy. The transition has been especially challenging on both fronts because it came as the city was in the middle of preparing \$370 million worth of new IT systems, including a new construction-permitting system, a new work management system, [City Light’s advanced metering infrastructure](#) and the new utility customer billing system, which ran \$34 million over budget.

“That’s a lot of money and that’s a lot of pressure on a lot of people,” says Bruce Blood, a 30-year information technology veteran with the City of Seattle who retired last January. He said later, “When I left in the last six months, I don’t recall morale ever being lower.”

Even among former employees who have witnessed or studied similar transitions, many characterize the consolidation as uniquely chaotic.

At the center is Mattmiller — 35, smart and a Microsoft veteran who’s fluent in a combination of tech- and bureaucrat-speak, using words like “functionality,” “processes,” and “stakeholders” with a book-on-tape formality.

The ceaseless optimism he conveys in his Municipal Tower office is a jarring contrast to the sky-is-falling panic of employees and customers, who described him as “bright” and “engaging,” but also in over his head and controlling. Few believe he was prepared to come out of the private sector to take the helm of the cruise-ship sized IT consolidation. That he’s viewed as a politically

connected friend of Mayor Murray’s does not help build faith that he is the right person for the job. Mattmiller disagrees with these assessments, but that disconnect between the people below him and his executive office is palpable in every conversation, both in the interviews and the commissioned survey. It’s clear that trust in his leadership is thin.

Although the consolidation still has ways to go, employees are already wondering if it can succeed, especially as the city prepares for a new mayor.

“You can go to every area: infrastructure, purchasing, project management, personnel,” said one IT employee. “Nobody is happy.”



Michael Mattmiller, speaking in 2015 Credit: City of Seattle

Consolidating IT may be the biggest change to city government in nearly two decades. Each department — SDOT, Public Utilities, Police — once had its own team of IT experts. There were obvious disadvantages to this: Each would use different technologies and organizing tools that may or may not translate easily to other departments. The city, says Mattmiller, “had 15 different IT departments with very different processes and in many cases very different technologies. So to get a project done in the city, you had to sometimes coordinate with all 15 different teams and get together with these big stakeholder groups that were very onerous and slowed things down.”

Before consolidation, says Mattmiller, the city had more than 1,500 different vendors. Even a year and four months after the consolidation officially began, officials are still taking inventory of each vendor's purpose.

While some employees were always resistant to the idea of consolidation (immediately after the plans were announced, some distributed a petition urging the City Council to slow down), others supported it. "I've been an advocate of consolidation for a long time," says Blood, the recently retired IT employee. "I think it's the right thing to do overall."

The hope was and still is to create one place where all departments get the help they need and where the solutions are largely consistent across the city.

Seattle has tried to consolidate before, in 2005-2006. It didn't go well. The city's Chief Technology Officer at the time, the highly regarded Bill Schrier, later called it "[My Biggest Failure](#)," accepting responsibility for not communicating goals well and over-promising that jobs would not be lost. Then-Mayor Greg Nickels abandoned the effort.

What the failed attempt a decade ago shows is that re-organizing technology systems in a city that employs 12,000 people is massively complicated. That is no different this time around.

Seattle's IT consolidation is not just a matter of moving all the servers into one building or buying the same model desktop for every employee. Seattle's process is going much further, moving hundreds of employees into one centralized office space. The idea is to create a system that does not have a person in City Light buying a technology that Public Utilities might already own. Speaking of centralizing department-specific experts, Mattmiller says, "You're not losing the police department, you're not losing any of our departments, but we're now giving an opportunity where that goodness you bring can actually support multiple departments and make us all more successful."

But that movement of personnel has proven to be the seed of a lot of the confusion. In short, departments no longer have their own internal technology experts, whom they'd grown to rely on and trust.

"I supported consolidating infrastructure, not the people doing the applications," said the former senior level employee. The needs of each department are so unique, said this person, removing the expertise was always going to be a problem. Permitting for construction, records management for police, dam control in City Light's Skagit Valley Hydroelectric Project: "All these things are pretty important to the business of the department. All those people are now centralized."

Speaking out loud, with reporters nearby, while awaiting a recent federal court hearing, senior police department officials complained it seemed that troubleshooting their 911 system, which has [significant problems to remedy](#), was now in the same queue as dam control in City Light's Skagit Valley Hydroelectric Project.

The customers describe feeling further separated from the help they need, unsure of who their point person is and frustrated with the pace of hiring and appointments. In a memo from City Light obtained by Crosscut, officials complained that, over the course of a year, they were only given two IT project managers, leaving 10 major projects, including the Denny Substation, the Advanced Metering Infrastructure and the Utility Discount Program, without point people. As of May, five of those had finally been filled.

Even replacing basic equipment has proven difficult. The memo pointed to a City Light employee who put in a request for a printer and fax machine last March. After nothing arrived, employees inquired in May, only to find they had not actually been ordered. “Meanwhile, 1 of 2 printers was taken away from the North service center that serves 100 people without a replacement printer put in.”

Similar criticism was echoed throughout the customer survey. “It’s not just the slowness, it’s a repetitive slowness,” reads one account. “Customer service at the beginning is great. I leave meetings smiling and then in a few weeks I feel like I’ve been duped again. I’ve been given a lot of empty promises and end up back at square one.”

“We’ve never had a product delivered yet,” reads another account of an employee interview. “Not one at all.”

Another complaint was even more succinct: “I don’t feel like a customer.” The survey organizers noted “universal nods” from other participants in a group session.

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Internally, among SIT employees, the results aren’t much better. The more than 600 employees are still learning new and confusing processes. Rank-and-file employees describe an environment in which even purchasing pencils or headsets can take weeks. One person Crosscut spoke with said it took nine weeks to replace a battery for a server.

Some blame a lack of clear organizational structure, where decision-making processes get muddled.

On larger purchases, employees complain that, after weeks of research and a recommendation from a steering committee made of six to eight people, the executive team has the authority to overrule and make unilateral decisions. “Eventually people get to the point where they just say, ‘Just tell us what to do’ because they get tired of being told they’re wrong,” said one employee. “It’s like a disease of disengagement in my organization. If only top people can make decisions, then other people just give up.”

The city code crafted for the new department grants Mattmiller this authority, running all final decisions on new technology through his office. If there’s a perception that people are being steamrolled, says Mattmiller, it’s an issue of communication. But there are times, he says, when he needs to make decisions from his view at the top. “As we get better at having steering committees and as we get better as a new consolidated IT department, it should be rare for a

steering committee to get overridden,” he says. “At the end of the day, though, the steering committees advise on behalf of their department and on behalf of the city. And in a situation where a steering committee makes a well-intentioned decision ... it may be necessary to take an alternative path.”

But some purchasing processes have been so opaque, several employees say they initially refused to sign off on invoices because they couldn't understand who'd made the final call or how much consideration had gone into alternatives.

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Despite the poor results of the survey, Mayor Murray is still committed. “The City has very recently undertaken a major reorganization in how IT is managed and change is always difficult,” he said in a statement. “My administration has often been willing to ask difficult questions about the success of our programs, which we did here, and to use that feedback as we move forward.

“While undergoing this transformation, Seattle IT has received awards for its work on digital equity and led the nation in defending consumer privacy after Congress voted to undermine it. This national recognition underscores the important and successful work being done for our city under Michael's leadership.”

But come Jan. 1, 2018, it will be a new mayor's job, in consultation with the Seattle City Council, to decide what to do. The consolidation did not come up in any of the many mayoral forums and none of the candidates addressed it on their website or campaign platforms. Will whoever wins in November commit to the consolidation and work to address the employees' concerns? Or will the new administration pull back, either to what the city had before or some halfway point? And either way, does Mattmiller stay? Replacing department heads is routine for new administrations and Mattmiller is close with Murray.

Retiree Blood says he thinks it can ultimately succeed, but, he says, there needs to be a major shift in the employees' relationship to their leadership. “How do you make sure people don't hate coming to work?”

At stake is how the city ushers in hundreds of millions of dollars of new tech to the city. On its surface, Seattle's IT department should thrive in such a tech-heavy city. But that can actually make retaining talent more difficult: There are high-paying alternatives just down the road. Although Blood had not seen any mass exodus, he worries that the new environment will lead to a talent drain. Other employees have said many of their colleagues are considering leaving or have recently left. Had he not been in a position to retire, Blood says, “I would have been looking for another job. The atmosphere was just not sustainable.”

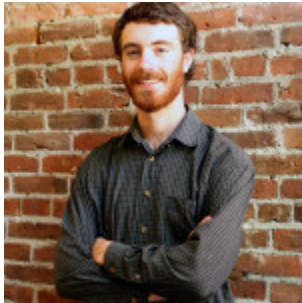
There's also a general nervousness among city departments that their tech projects won't come in on time, be it the new permitting or police records management system.

For his part, Mattmiller doesn't know what the new administration will mean for IT. "That's up to the new mayor," he says. "Absent that, where we are with consolidation, I think we made an incredible amount of progress in just our first year. There have been enough benefits that I think our council and our stakeholders will see that would help them make the decision to continue moving forward."

The survey is the first step in a broader consulting effort, called the Critical IT Processes Project, to make SIT function better. Mattmiller doesn't shy away from the fact that the results now look bad, but he says that process will soon yield results. "I hope that over the next year through implementing many of the changes that are going to be made through the Critical IT Processes Project, as well as some other changes we're making, will help to move the needle."

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