Accenture Federal Services & Dr. Portia Crowe

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00:29
Welcome to the federal tech podcast. My name is John Gilroy and I'll be your moderator. Our guest today is Dr. Portia Crowe, chief data strategy director for defense for Accenture. Today, we're going to talk about federal data strategy and digital government transformation. Now Dr. Crowe, I did my homework on you. I got up early this morning and I went to LinkedIn. And I got a piece of paper and ink and I wrote down all your degrees, then I went on all your awards, and then I ran out of ink. And so I mean, 21 minor point was 20 years in the Army. I mean, you have a fantastic background for this. I mean, I think Accenture really brought in an MVP from the DOD for this position. So you did a great job. So maybe give her a quick, nutshell background. And we'll get into discussion, please.

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Sure. Hi, John, thank you for going to LinkedIn, a lot of information on LinkedIn these days. So just a little bit about me is that, you know, I did spend 20 years as an Army civilian, I did everything from research and development in the labs. I am an acquisition corps member. And I also my last job was at army futures command as the chief data officer for the network cross functional team. And then I transitioned to industry last year, and came to Accenture. And really I wanted to find out, you know, being 20 years, you know, in DOD, kind of how does it look on the other side with industry, right? How are they able to go at speed at scale, very complex problems, do very, very intricate analysis, predictability, using the latest technologies. And so I kind of wanted to come and and just learn from a great organization and be around industry partners, and learn the business side, as well as the technology

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and one of the many awards, you get an award for working with a tactical cloud. Now, I've been around the block a few times. And I've I've started off talking about the private cloud than the public cloud, the hybrid cloud, this is my first discussion about the tactical cloud. So what is a tactical cloud anyway,

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so So in the I can speak for the army, right? So we, the Army has to operate in austere environments where the bandwidth is limited. You know, you are sometimes don't even have communications using you know, fiber, you know, you're on radios, you have very limited communications and very limited pipelines to get the data to where it needs to go. So tactical cloud is a deployed capability today, that allows users to have a cloud environment, whether it's local, you know, local servers, as well as connect back to big brain cloud, right. So where you are connected to fiber, and it gives the the soldiers in the users capabilities to be able to, to use either localized data, that that they can have at any place anywhere that they really need it in some of those austere environments. And so, you know, tactical cloud can be a hybrid cloud, commercial, private, it can be configured to weather your local or, you know, local servers or in the cloud. And so I think the Army team has done a really great job as adapting technology to those types of environments.

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There's a podcast in town called fez at the edge. And when I listen to you, I'm running down edge, this, this could be an F 35, somewhere in the world, connecting to how many other sensors coming back to the cloud, and making rapid decisions. There's not a lot of wiggle room in there. I mean, you don't have the no wiggle room at all. Is there?

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No, I mean, you know, I think in having that type of technology at the edge, you've got to think about growth, right? What are the opportunities for growth, however, you're physically constrained as well, right? There's only so many zeros and ones that can you can push through the pipe. So it's got to be what is the data that you need when you need it? And it's got to be readily available? Quite, I think, just priority of data. Right? So you know, if you're doing a certain mission, you might not need, you know, your social media running or your chat servers or whatever that you know, that is and so that you get to prioritize the services that you that you use. And I would say that with the technology that we have today at the end edge, you know, we can run vast amounts of processing and compute and speed at the at the edge where we didn't have it before. And I would say that the army as well as the other services are taking advantage of that kinds of technology and working with industry partners to get the capabilities that they need. Once we get

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those massive amounts of data coming in tons and tons of different sensors and everything else. I would imagine that you have to use technologies like artificial intelligence and machine learning. And, you know, I, you know, I've done so many interviews, and it's like a company has been, it'll say, Claude software been in business for 10 years. Oh, do you do artificial intelligence? Oh, yeah. Yeah, we have options. Okay. Then there's Manny software and longing to attend you. Yeah, we yeah, we do artificial intelligence soon. So what I want to get an idea from you is how to separate you know, the tourists from the purists. It's the Yeah, we got to two Oh, no, you know, they're like, you know, from the ground up, they do artificial interest. So how do you separate the tourism? Of course, in this aspect?

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I love this question. Because we get when I was in government, we got inundated with buzzwords, right. It was cyber then it was data, then it became the cloud. And so like you're in now, artificial intelligence, machine learning. And so what we're finding out is that I always kind of think about it this way. I think sometimes we start with what is the technology versus what is the problem that we're trying to solve? Right? So I think people come and are like, we can do AI and ML? Well, guess what if you don't have the infrastructure or the environment, that sets you up to do AI, ml or even cloud for that matter? It's not going to work, right, you're going to pay a high cost for for kind of missing the boat on what the technology can bring for you. So I think just one having the talent base, right. So you know, we have over 700 plus AI certified folks, right? You start looking at the credentials, right? How many, we have 40,000 people certified in AI globally, at Accenture, we have patents, we work with universities, we're on the cutting edge of AI. Oh, and by the way, we have credentials that shows how we used AI and ML in commercial as well, as well as federal. So I think showing all of that you're like, Okay, here's a company that knows how to do AI and ML, not just the technology, but the way we approach it, right. And so human ingenuity behind some of the problems that we have. And guess what, sometimes you don't need AI ML to solve your problems. It could be as simple as automation, optimizing algorithms, right? So we never think what technology first, right? And I think anybody that comes in says, Oh, we've got all the answers AI ml, you kind of want to look at what's under the hood, right? You really want an approach to the problem that you have may not be a IML, it may not be tactical cloud, it may not be cloud at all, you've got to kind of walk back the problem a little bit.

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mazing number 40,000. I was reading an article preparing for the interview today. And it talked about transition to the cloud digital transformation. And the writer said this is a very succinct sentence that he talks about. He says, you know, the speed and moving to the cloud is largely determined by the number of talented humans organizations can find. So it's not widgets. It's not sensors. It's not satellites. It's humans.

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And humans again, yeah. Wow. As humans.

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So now you're talking about numbers like 40,000? I gotta ask you about a big funny word here called exabyte. So I'm gonna go home. And I'm really impressed my wife and kids. Oh, yeah, I got a exabyte of doughnuts in the garage. I mean, so what is an excellent petabytes? exabytes? Like, just stop counting a 20? Or 30 numerals? Or how big is an exabyte?

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So an exabyte is actually 1000 petabytes? Oh, right. Yeah. So I think I think a lot of us, you know, we kind of know what Peda in our minds were like, okay, petabytes, really, really big. So an exabyte exponentially, you know, is is so much larger than that. And I think you can kind of just some lead up to big data,

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and just managing these massive amounts of data is just a challenge in of itself.

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Yeah. And I think that we, as we're starting to see the emphasis on data led transformation, you know, really getting more precise around data management and, you know, data governance policies, that we have to take into account, you know, the magnitude of data that a company actually has and what we have to work with, right, because there's security, there's policies, there has to be a really strong vision and strategy and approach to to managing massive amount of data. And so I think that as you kind of think through some of the attributes, right, cost comes into play, right? So and and do you need all that data, right? Do you need to store an exabyte of data? Sometimes you don't, right? So sometimes it's just time to live data and you can throw it on the floor. Sometimes you want to store all that data for forensics or for other uses predictability to run your AI ML model. OLS I also say the network is really important. And you brought this up a tactical cloud. Right? So how, what network? Are you running this data off of? Right? Is it? Is it you know, a fiber connected building? Or are you running it in environments where you may not have connectivity? So I think managing data requires a really strong framework, really strong strategy and some really good human thinking behind the approach to managing data, right? And you got to think through all your attributes, performance, scalability, what kind of insights and value do you need to get out of your data? And what data do you actually really need? I think it's a growing problem, especially with Internet of Things. You know, we're starting to see I forget, it's probably exabytes of data running through our reading through the network today, right. So I think that as we as we start to see massive amounts of, of data. And now it's not only within your organization, now we're looking at data sharing, right. So that means more compounds of data coming into your organization, or going out. So I think it just takes a really strong framework to kind of put together what it is needed for a solution that can be adopted and adapted for an organization.

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Well, I got to talk about these stinking human beings we got to deal with all the time. And, you know, when you manage massive amounts of data and try to design artificial intelligence programs to manage that data, inevitably, humans are involved in Everly humans bring bias. Some people like barbecue from North Carolina, some people like it from Texas, I mean, he's got a bias. And that could alter the way they present things. And I think if we're giving artificial intelligence that much control over this race sensitive data, we got to realize we look in the mirror and go, Hey, you know, my name is Porsche, I gotta buy. My name is John, I got a bias. There's, there's bias in handling this isn't there?

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Absolutely. And I think that there's so much research into human cognition, of what is behind the biases, right, I think, especially with ethical AI, responsible AI, there's just so much data out there that we already know. And we can try to prevent some of the biases, right. So really, it's it's, you know, making sure that your sources of data is not skewed, making sure that I one person is not the only person working on your model. So that you want a diverse team diverse perspectives, you want to make sure that you've got enough different types of data that you're not by biasing your your data. And you also want to be careful of your, the actual data that you're using. Right? So I agree with you humans are humans, right? I mean, you may go into solving a problem with already a preconceived notion. And I think working with diverse, a diverse team can bring

different perspectives, different outlook on things. And then I would also say that you want to continuously monitor right, your your, and test your algorithms, right. And I think through that process, that you'll also start to kind of figure out what your biases may be, and can adjust that. So yeah, I think that with preconceived notions of humans, we just have to be careful of not only being the single point or independent person to do that. This is a

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topic diversity, a kick around the classroom all the time. And I tell my students, the same thing I'm telling you, it's not diversity, for the sake of diversity, it's diversity in order to win. I mean, if you want to win, there's no, there's no, there's no choice. I mean, we're not playing against, you know, 10 people from Kansas, we're talking about all these different millions of bright people. I

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know a lot of smart people from Canada.

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Well, you kind of earned your stripes, the military reference, of course, earned your stripes working at the Aberdeen Proving Grounds with a lot of heavy duty army network modernization, some heavy lifting, I imagined might have pulled some cable in your day and done everything. But I want to take this conversation and move it up, up maybe 40,000 feet somewhere in a plane looking at the federal government. And there is a general federal data strategy as well. And I think Accenture federal services is weighed in very carefully on this. In fact, if you go to their website, there's all kinds of articles on the best ways to use artificial intelligence to avoid bias, best way to start off hotel agents in military and civilian applications. And, in fact, the article this morning, I read, it talked about let's use artificial intelligence to give greater service to people, the IRS. And it says there's so many applications for that. So so just generally speaking here about you know, Accenture federal services and what their idea is of this whole federal data strategy. Sure.

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So I Accenture, federal services. We work across all the federal agencies, and what I've learned coming, you know, out of DOD and broader outlook of what federal work that we do and how we do it. There's so many lessons aren't right. I mean, it is a tremendous amount of people and effort in partnerships that we have that make successful so solutions and capabilities, right. And so I think that kudos, one to all the Federal Chief Data Officers, all the data leaders that actually came together. And that got an approved federal data strategy. And what that really is, it's, it's, it's about best practices for ethical data governance, management and its use of data. And then to top that off, they were even more successful in getting an approved 2021 Action Plan. And so through that action plan, it's an iterative process that incorporates lessons learned from industry, government, the surveys, you know, people like Accenture, federal, that have been, you know, doing this for a while and have lessons learned on whether it is how to best share data, or do data management, better. Dev SEC ops, you know, what it is, are the processes, the things that we can put in place, share those lessons out with the rest of the federal agencies. Also, kudos to the team that putting together a Federal Chief Data Council. And so I was able to make the public council that they had, I believe it was last year. And it was really

interesting to hear that, you know, they're working on upskilling talent, right? What is that plan look like? So everybody's vying for the same talent and AI ml data? How can they use the workforce that they have today? to upskill those folks, right, and so I appreciate that, you know, being in the DOD, so use me, right, I have skills too, but I need to constantly be learning. And so they have a great upscaling pilot that they've implemented. Also, they understand the needs and the opportunities, and they are working across federal agencies to do better and to do more. And I think to bring to light some of the concepts that they're just coming across now, you know, so how can they collaborate more on classify some use cases, so industry can take a look at it and really be informed about some of their use cases are how they want to invest their money. And so we also at Accenture host, a federal data roundtable. And so I've been honored to be a facilitator on that. And we bring together a lot of federal leaders, Chief Data Officers, we have keynotes, we have panels, we have great discussions around data stewardship, around, you know, what are the trends that are going to happen in the future? How do we, you know, not only worry about today, but get ahead of what's going to happen tomorrow. And so we've, we've been able to bring that form together and make it really robust. And we've learned a lot

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was that a gifted people at Accenture federal services, and I have a gift as well. My gift is in designing T shirts. Is that your website today? And I noticed that you have there's a headline on one of your articles. It's like digital government transformations like changing dry changing drivers while the car is moving. Around table, because that's what you're trying to do I love the DoD isn't closed down for a day and say, Okay, let's put it in a new cloud system. No, it's 365 20. It's not put your feet up and smoke a cigar and it's Fourth of July.

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No, they do that, too.

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It's, it's a, it's a difficult process. I mean, you just can't don't have a Greenfield and take your time and come back in six weeks to know it's has to be done right today, as we're constantly changing, going back and forth,

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literally. And and a lot of the trends that we kind of see for the future is, you know, there's a lot of product models already working today, right? And we kind of think about them as legacy processes or models or operations. So how do you insert new things, new processes, new technologies, while still sustaining and maintaining the ones that you have today? And when is the right time to to retire? Or, you know, start to diminish some of those resources that you're currently using for new things, right. And so as you're saying, you're kind of building things while in flight because you can't just stop, right? It's a continuous process.

19:07
So on fifth grade used to have true false tests, so we give you a true false question here. And you can see if it's good enough for a fifth grader, okay. By 2028, artificial intelligence can apply to tasks that take up 30% of federal time. That's that's quite a statement, isn't it? True or False? Or when are

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you gonna say true? Because I'm an optimist. And I said, Wow, that's a big number. And actually 30% I would like to see it closer to 40. Right? Because it's 2028 you're talking about right? Okay. So if we give the human race credit, which we are, I say right, because humans are humans, that we have learned so much about AI and ML, we're moving on to what's next, right? Adaptive AI, adaptive ml that we're gonna meet, beat that number.

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The problem I see another with the human beings and all this is that, you know, 10 years ago, no one studied artificial Intel origins as an undergrad, maybe some corners of MIT. And so there has to be concentrating going on. And so I would think that in this roundtable, they have to emphasize training and and what's new and because why we could do this interview tomorrow, and it's probably three or four new headlines, something pops up in there. And so how do you incorporate concentrating in the project?

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So I would say, one is that we have to partner with academia and the UX, right. I mean, that is, you know, that is probably one of the most critical steps and I think that we've done across federal agencies have been doing an awesome job with that. And so I think we've got a lot of research and development opportunities with, with the universities. A lot of our folks that work at Accenture, actually art teachers and professors in those universities, right. I think pulling in the interns from those universities, right, and I think doing the mixing of the military and the commercial folks and people that work in federal, with academia with folks who've been in industry for a while, it's a great mix. It's a great mix, right? Because it takes all that talent, to do all of this all the great things we've been talking about what the you know, the technology that we have today, whether it's satellites, communications, ISR, you know, so many things,

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well, I gave you a fifth grade, true or false question. Now I'm gonna move to college physics. The earlier ones for first grade. So as a physicist, by the name of Niels Bohr, we all know him and Danish guy. And he famously said, it's difficult to make predictions, especially about the future. So I'm put your feet to the fire here and say, Okay, I got it to some granted here and write these predictions in a crowded. So where do you see this whole area heading? pretty optimistic from the 30% to 40% number. So what do you see it has been for five years?

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So that's a great question. It's a great question. I wish I had my magic ball. But I would say that, one, I think there will continue to be an explosion within AI ml. Right? autonomy. I think unmanned, whether it's unmanned, from, you know, robotics, whether it's vehicles, drones, I think that we have so much technology still to pursue. So I would say that, we probably do need to concentrate more on the infrastructure and the way we're architecting things, because in order to use new technology, like al ml, you know, we've got to make sure that the infrastructure can handle it, and that we're architecting the future, right, and so that we can allow for growth that we can allow for expansion for opportunity. And then we don't always have to go backwards to fix things, right. It's always just growth upon growth. And, you know, we just keep kind of piling things on and just keep

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going. So I think that there needs to be a little bit heavier emphasis on that which, you know, is not sexy, right. But in order to optimize the new technologies that we have, we do have to start thinking about that. I would also say that our growth, resilience and innovation in this country and our our partner nations have, I believe that will continue to explode, right, as we start to talk about continue to talk about data sharing, right? What are the optimal ways that we can data share in a secure environment, right, through different classifications? I would also say probably Lastly, is is what is happening in Ukraine is very eye opening, I think, the threats and the vulnerabilities that we're seeing in our own technology, and then what's happening in Ukraine is, is really making us think through what the adversaries can do. And their ability to do it. Right. And and that they are doing it. Right. And I think it's you know, when you can have the ability to do and then to are you really doing it? And yes, they are. So I think that we have to look at what those threats and vulnerabilities are and safeguard our data. Because we you know, we worry about having the right access the right at the right time at the right place for our data. But we also have to remember the adversary is also looking at our data. They're also using our data against us, right. So I think, what what we're starting to see coming out of Ukraine and other places of conflict is going to help us inform the future.

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Well, unfortunately, Portia, we're running out of time here. Thank you very much for appearing on the federal tech podcast. My name is John Gilroy, and hopefully as much fun the next time. Thank you.

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Thanks for listening to the federal tech podcast. If you liked the federal tech podcast, please support us by giving us a rating and review on Apple podcasts