

ROBERT MCMILLAN BUSINESS AUG 21, 2014 6:30 AM

The White House Gives Up on Making Coders Dress Like Adults

The U.S. Government wants to hire more people like Mikey Dickerson. He's the former Google engineer the White House recently tapped to lead the new U.S. Digital Service. Dickerson has impeccable credentials. He comes from one of Silicon Valley's most successful companies. He flew into Washington a year ago to salvage the disastrous Healthcare.gov website. [...]



Introducing the U.S. Digital Service



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Dickerson has impeccable credentials. He comes from one of Silicon Valley's most successful companies. He flew into Washington a year ago to salvage the disastrous Healthcare.gov website. And by all accounts, he did an amazing job. Now, his White House on-boarding has become a kind of recruiting tool for Uncle Sam. And just for good measure, the feds want all the techies out there to know Dickerson wasn't forced to do that amazing job in a suit and tie.

In a White House video, Dickerson says he is asked one question again and again by people curious about his new job. They "want to know if I'm wearing a suit to work every day," Dickerson explains in the video. "Because that's just the quickest shorthand way of asking: 'Is this just the same old business as usual or are they actually going to listen?'"

When it comes to computers, the federal government has a nasty reputation for prizing ISO standards and regulatory checkboxes above working code. The video is the White House's best effort at saying it's going to get real and hire people based on what they can do, not how they dress for work. Ben Balter, who spent some time as a White House Presidential Innovation Fellow a few years back, tells us he had to code in suit and tie.

According to the Dickerson, that's changed. He isn't showing up in a T-shirt, but he's free to wear a wrinkled button-down and comfortable pants.

By subtle measures, however, the video also shows how far things still have to go. One thing that's even more important than the latitude to ditch a tie is the latitude to choose the best tool for the job. Fixing government procurement so developers aren't locked into a rigid list of predefined tools will take more work. In the video, Dickerson opens up his government-issued Blackberry smartphone and discovers his password doesn't meet government muster. "The password you have typed is too short," he reads from a screen.

And if you browse through federal government job applications such as this [White House IT job](#), you'll see random drug tests and college degrees are still part of the equation. Under the job's key requirements section is this nugget: "RELOCATION EXPENSES WILL NOT BE PAID." You're unlikely to see that on a [Google job ad](#).

>They're starting to look official now, aren't they? They've got suits and everything.


So if you do take a job at the White House, you may want to bring your own snacks, expect to work at a desk, not a couch, and hold off on bringing your skateboard to work.

Still, the feds are trying to do tech in a clueful fashion. The Obama administration has opened the door to open-source software and [collaborative coding](#). And, hey, even the [CIA is using Amazon's web services](#).

Midway through the video, there's a shot of a staff meeting where President Obama gives Dickerson and his fellow tech "hot-shots" a shout out. "They're starting to look official now, aren't they? They've got suits and everything," Obama quips, a nod to the black jacket and yellow tie Dickerson has worn to the meeting. Dickerson tells the president this isn't the norm. "This is literally only because you're here," he replies.



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