TechCongress fellowship aims to translate language between tech, legislative communities

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There's nothing more frustrating than feeling misunderstood.

Oftentimes, it can appear to the American technical community, the government in Washington, DC, and its audiences that each side is speaking a language the other can't understand.

Enter TechCongress (http://www.techcongress.io/), a Washington-based nonprofit whose mission is simple: "To build 21st century government with technology talent," said Travis Moore, its founder and CEO. "Our goal is to bridge. To bridge the tech community and the policymaking community," he said.

And its looking for its next generation of fellows to help it do just that.

Moore knows this lost-in-translation dance all too well. He spent six years on staff with former Chairman and Ranking Member of the Energy and Commerce Committee, Rep. Henry Waxman, D., Calif.

"Technology issues would come up here and there, and I would look around for people to explain these concepts," Moore said. He rattled off a number of pertinent subjects, from NSA surveillance implications to net neutrality. "What I found was that there weren't people in the building that could explain these concepts to me." That wasn't the case for other industries, like health care and education, whose members the gap between experts and policymakers. Moore knew something had to change. "Ok, we want to replicate this for technology," he said. And TechCongress was born.

The group utilizes fellows from its year-long Congressional Innovation Fellowship (http://www.techcongress.io/the-fellowship) program who serve as sort of information "hubs," Moore continued. "On any given day, you may be writing a letter to a federal agency on a policy issues, you may be writing questions, preparing for hearings or markups. "Your job is essentially to know the issues." Armed with this knowledge, fellows then partake in collaborative work with outside experts, taking the information gleaned about certain subjects and helping others understand it.

This year marked the conclusion of TechCongress' first-ever CIF, with John Costello and JC Cannon, CIPM, CIPP/US, CIPT, serving as its inaugural group of fellows, beating 213 applications for the prestigious spots.

Both fellows represent different routes the program could take for different people, Moore said. Whereas Costello's work takes a generalist's approach, covering everything from the Office of Personnel Management's breach to the FBI's encryption debate, Cannon is "engaged in a deep dive" on privacy issues in the health care sector.

For Cannon, his journey to TechCongress began in an unlikely place. "I spent six years in the navy and then 20 years working at startups as a computer programmer," he said. "Then, I joined Microsoft where I spent 16 years working on online privacy issues." He didn't end up there on purpose, either. "I was sort of dragged into it," he continued. "I was an evangelist," trying to get people to embrace Microsoft systems. When colleagues saw his talent for persuasion, they jumped. "'Hey, we'd love it if you'd evangelize privacy like you evangelize Windows!' – they convinced me it would be challenging and fun, and there I was 12 years later, an expert in online privacy."

After his 16-year foray with Microsoft, "I was ready to do something different," he said. Washington had an allure. "And in the end, I always sort of wanted to get involved in politics and the creation of policy. I wanted to give back to society in a way that my experience allowed me to do. I thought collectively, I could make a difference in D.C."

Cannon shopped around, looking at non-governmental organizations, which he didn't feel was the right fit. He also wanted to be involved on the Hill. When he stumbled upon the CIF, he found the right mix of congressional involvement with his technological experience. "I now have time and extended passion to get involved," Cannon said. "Now, I want to relax and get off the treadmill and focus on things that are important to me and helping society." His fellowship allows him to do that.

Cannon works alongside the Democratic office of the House Ways and Means Health Subcommittee (http://democrats.waysandmeans.house.gov/subcommittees/health), for which he specifically provides guidance on issues of electronic health care records, privacy and interoperability.

"Our [fellowship] position is to listen," he said. "And [discover] what kind of legislation can we make or not create to help [legislators] out. I'm not there to convince them 'no, that's not right,' I'm there to understand their position." When working with folks from across the aisle, "I try to give them a position on what I've heard and what would make a good piece of legislation, and we see if we could somehow meet in the middle," he continued. But there aren't debates. "We're not sitting at a table trying to iron out legislation," he added.

Cannon, who sees the fellowship position as akin to that of a legislative staffer, the transition has been worth it. While the passion he holds for his work is evident, it elevates when he talks about his fellowship.

"It's hard to articulate ... they're really small ripples," he said. "It's like learning French and actually going into a coffee shop and actually ordering a latte in French." He described his experience running a tech hearing, preparing the questions, conducting research, prepping bios, and assisting the deputy directors to ensure all went without a hitch. "Sitting back there and seeing the congressman nod, like, 'this is what I wanted' – YAY!" he said.

This kind of intensely hands-on work is normal for the job. "The reality is you're not going to be sitting in a room waiting for people to asking you technology questions," he said. He's set up a briefing on interoperability that Nancy Pelosi's team attended; and he's now putting out a piece of legislation. "I went through that entire process," he said.

to Microsoft to dropping a piece a paper in a box."

For Cannon, the fellowship is an essential opportunity for like-minded individuals to get their foot in the political door. It's also a chance for the tech community to better position itself to assist those in Washington.

Moore said the response to TechCongress has been enormously positive. "Helping each part of the sector understand each other is a valuable pursuit."

And it's the fellows who function as boots on the ground. With Cannon and Costello's experience wrapping up, TechCongress is looking for a new round of fellows [through the end of Septembe (http://www.techcongress.io/apply/)](http://www.techcongress.io/apply/)r to take their place – four of them this time.

Ideal fellows encapsulate three things. "One is experience or knowledge of the technology sector" Moore said. "Someone who has spent a lot of time in tech sector and knows how it goes." Then, there's the ability to translate that knowledge to members of Congress who's understanding of all things tech may be on the very basic side. Lastly, perspective fellows must have "a history of getting results, persistence," he added. "On the Hill, it takes a lot of persistence to get things done."

Fellows should be ready to make a difference.

"We view this as a really tremendous opportunity to be part of a much bigger movement that we are one small part of," Moore said.

Cannon agreed. "This is just another way to be a part of that process."

Top Photo: John Costello, Travis Moore and JC Cannon.