

Federal technology staffers resign en masse rather than help Musk and DOGE

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Elon Musk, left, receives a chainsaw from Argentina's President Javier Milei, right, as they arrive speaks at the Conservative Political Action Conference, CPAC, at the Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center, Thursday, Feb. 20, 2025, in Oxon Hill, Md. (AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana)

Trump's administration were political ideologues who did not have the necessary skills or experience for the task ahead of them.

The mass resignation of engineers, data scientists, designers and product managers is a temporary setback for Musk and the Republican

president's tech-driven purge of the federal workforce. It comes amid a flurry of court challenges that have sought to stall, stop or unwind their efforts to fire or coerce thousands of government workers out of jobs.

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In a statement, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt was dismissive of the mass resignation.

“Anyone who thinks protests, lawsuits, and lawfare will deter President Trump must have been sleeping under a rock for the past several years,” Leavitt said. “President Trump will not be deterred from delivering on the promises he made to make our federal government more efficient and more accountable to the hardworking American taxpayers.”

Musk posted on his social media site X that the story was “fake news” and suggested that the staffers were “Dem political holdovers” who “would have been fired had they not resigned.”

The staffers who resigned had worked for the United States Digital Service, but said their duties were being integrated into DOGE. Their former office, the USDS, was established under President Barack Obama after the botched rollout of Healthcare.gov, the web portal that millions of Americans use to sign up for insurance plans through the Democrat’s signature health care law.

All previously held senior roles at such tech companies as Google and Amazon and wrote in their resignation letter that they joined the government out of a sense of duty to public service.

Trump's empowerment of Musk upended that. The day after Trump's inauguration, the staffers wrote, they were called into a series of interviews that foreshadowed the secretive and disruptive work of Musk's' Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE.

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According to the staffers, people wearing White House visitors' badges, some of whom would not give their names, grilled the nonpartisan employees about their qualifications and politics. Some made statements that indicated they had a limited technical understanding. Many were young and seemed guided by ideology and fandom of Musk — not improving government technology.

“Several of these interviewers refused to identify themselves, asked questions about political loyalty, attempted to pit colleagues against each other, and demonstrated limited technical ability,” the staffers wrote in their letter. “This process created significant security risks.”

Earlier this month, about 40 staffers in the office were laid off. The firings dealt a devastating blow to the government's ability to administer and safeguard its own technological footprint, they wrote.

“These highly skilled civil servants were working to modernize Social Security, veterans' services, tax filing, health care, disaster relief, student aid, and other critical services,” the resignation letter states. “Their removal endangers millions of Americans who rely on these services every day. The sudden loss of their technology expertise makes critical systems and American's data less safe.”

Roughly one-third of the 65 staffers who remained at USDS quit on Tuesday rather than take on new duties under DOGE.

“We will not use our skills as technologists to compromise core government systems, jeopardize Americans' sensitive data, or dismantle critical public services,” they wrote. “We will not lend our expertise to carry out or legitimize DOGE's actions.”

The slash-and-burn effort Musk is leading diverges from what was initially outlined by Trump during the 2024 presidential campaign. DOGE, a nod to Musk's favorite cryptocurrency meme coin, was initially presented as a blue-ribbon commission that would exist outside government.

After the election, however, Musk hinted there was more to come, posting to his social media site, X, “Threat to democracy? Nope, threat to BUREAUCRACY!!!” He has leaned aggressively into the role since.

Last week he stood on stage at the Conservative Political Action Conference gathering outside Washington, where he boasted of his exploits and hoisted a blinged-out, Chinese-made chainsaw above his head that was gifted by Argentinian President Javier Milei.

“This is the chainsaw for bureaucracy,” Musk bellowed from the stage.

Still, Musk has tried to keep technical talent in place, with the bulk of the layoffs in the Digital Service office focused on people in roles like designers, product managers, human resources and contracting staff, according to interviews with current and former staff.

Of the 40 people let go earlier this month, only one was an engineer — an outspoken and politically active staffer name Jonathan Kamens, who said in an interview with the AP that he believes he was fired for publicly endorsing Vice President Kamala Harris, a Democrat, on his personal blog and being critical of Musk in chats with colleagues.

“I believe that Elon Musk is up to no good. And I believe that any data that he gains access to is going to be used for purposes that are inappropriate and harmful to Americans,” Kamens said.

U.S. Digital Service veterans, who spoke on the condition of anonymity out of fear of reprisal, recalled experiencing a similar sort of shock about how government processes worked that Musk and his team are discovering. Over time, many developed an appreciation for why certain things in government had to be treated with more care than in the private sector.

“‘Move fast and break things’ may be acceptable to someone who owns a business and owns the risk. And if things don’t go well, the damage is compartmentalized. But when you break things in government, you’re breaking things that belong to people who didn’t sign up for that,” said Cordell Schachter, who until last month was the chief information officer at the U.S. Department of Transportation.

USDS was established over a decade ago to do things like improving services for veterans, and it helped create a free government-run portal so tax filers did not have to go through third parties like TurboTax. It also devised systems to improve the way the federal government purchased technology.

It has been embroiled in its fair share of bureaucracy fights and agency turf wars with chief information officers across government who resented interlopers treading in their agency's systems. USDS' power across government stemmed from the imprimatur of acting on behalf of the White House and its founding mission of improving service for the American people.

Leavitt, the White House press secretary, is one of three administration officials who face a lawsuit from The Associated Press on first- and fifth-amendment grounds. The AP says the three are punishing the news agency for editorial decisions they oppose. The White House says the AP is not following an executive order to refer to the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America.

Associated Press video journalist Rodrique Ngowi contributed from Boston.