

# Moving Toward a Better Experience

**P**hil Bertolini spent almost 15 years as deputy county executive and CIO for Oakland County, Mich., earning a reputation as one of the nation's most innovative local government IT leaders. He now advises state and local government officials as vice president of the Center for Digital Government.

In this Q&A, Bertolini shares his thoughts on potential roadblocks to improving government experience and offers insights on how public sector leaders

can move forward on transforming the way agencies interact with constituents.

## **What are the biggest challenges to transforming government experience?**

I think the biggest challenge is the digital equity side of things. To truly transform into this new digital experience, governments have to manage the digital divide and digital equity issues. And part of that is also digital literacy. People may have access to digital services, but they also need the skills to use them.

Technical debt is a big issue, too. Governments have numerous old technologies that aren't easily updated and can't morph into this new model for service delivery. A related challenge is the lack of internal resources for technology modernization. Governments struggle to compete

with the private sector for the talent needed to run these projects, so they'll need help from industry partners. I think this is where you can make a good argument that industry partners need to step up their game.

## **What technologies are key to transforming government experience?**

Experience certainly includes all the technologies that support e-commerce — the tools that enable you to do business through a portal instead of being there in person. Emerging technologies like AI are increasingly part of this discussion, too. During the pandemic, we've seen great examples of using chatbots, intelligent agents and other smart technologies to enhance government services. People used to worry that AI would take people's jobs, but now governments are struggling to find employees. If governments can't find enough people, they need to augment their staffs with technology. AI is going to be embedded in almost everything they do going forward.

Many newer technology platforms will have these capabilities built in. That's why I believe governments will need to move toward a platform approach as they modernize. Instead of cobbling together bits and pieces, they should be looking at an underlying platform that will help them implement new capabilities in a way that's more efficient and sustainable.

## **What's your advice to government IT leaders on the best way to move forward?**

I believe now is the time to take both a retrospective and prospective look at service delivery and experience. Jurisdictions deployed multiple services over the past 20 months. To some extent, governments were throwing things out there to see what worked. You really need to inventory and assess all those things to see what constituents really found valuable. Then you need to start looking at how to pull those one-off services into sustainable and resilient programs going forward.

Sustainability and resilience will really be key. Right now federal money is flowing, but eventually that spigot will be shut off. Governments have to deploy these services in ways that can live beyond this infusion of money. The worst thing you can do is roll out this enhanced constituent experience and then shut it down because of budget reductions.

Finally, even though we've talked a lot about the challenges, I want to say all of this is doable. On the technology side, everything you'll need already exists — it's just a matter of applying the tools in the right way. There are, of course, people and change management issues, but we can overcome those, too.

