

Embracing the new normal for **digital services**

The progress agencies made during the pandemic is just a glimpse of what's possible with digital service delivery

When the COVID-19 pandemic started, the government rushed to offer more digital services, and as the public health crisis stretched into a third year, agencies are relying on those services more than ever. Like their private-sector counterparts, they have come to recognize that digital service delivery is the key to solving a range of challenges.

Technology played a key role throughout the pandemic thanks in part to industry and government working together to support remote work for agency employees and create new systems on the fly to manage the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines and minimize the spread of the disease through contact tracing.

Although the pandemic exposed the

weaknesses of some government IT systems, it also showed that agencies can move fast when they need to. In the past two years, all levels of government have made progress in adopting new customer-centric services and strategies, and now they must maintain that momentum and treat digital service delivery as the new normal. Beyond the immediate improvements in efficiency and customer satisfaction, embracing digital ways of operating will enable agencies to tackle the biggest challenges facing the government and society as a whole.

That realization is clear at the highest levels of government. In December 2021, President Joe Biden issued the "Executive Order on Transforming Federal Customer Experience and

Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government," which states that "as the United States faces critical challenges, including recovering from a global pandemic, promoting prosperity and economic growth, advancing equity, and tackling the climate crisis, the needs of the people of the United States, informed by, in particular, an understanding of how they experience government, should drive priorities for service delivery improvements."

Modernizing the employee and customer experiences

Rick Parrish, a vice president at research firm Forrester, wrote in a recent blog post that "in 2022, the global public sector will respond to major economic and social trends — such as concerns

Digital Service Delivery by the Numbers

Sources: FCW, National Association of State CIOs, U.S. Digital Service, White House

\$3.5

BILLION

Amount of cost savings or avoidance the U.S. Digital Service has helped agencies achieve in 5 years

9

BILLION HOURS

Annual paperwork burden imposed on the public by executive departments and agencies

83%

FCW survey respondents who said their agencies were committed to building flexible IT systems based on their experience during the pandemic

10%

FCW survey respondents who said government sustainability mandates are reflected in their IT procurement processes

92%

State CIOs who said they expanded the use of collaboration platforms during the pandemic

about the future of the workplace and the economy, climate change, and digital privacy — with actions that reverberate throughout the world's economy.”

Forrester's five key predictions for 2022 include this: One-third of global civil servants will become permanent hybrid workers, and the agencies that don't accommodate them will lose talented employees to other agencies or the private sector.

Many employees value the benefits of remote work, and the practice also offers agencies the ability to hire talented workers regardless of location. Agencies should modernize their approach to recruitment and retention so they can create a workplace that values diversity and keeps employees engaged and productive. Agencies also need to foster real-time collaboration between on-site and remote employees. Open communications and transparency foster employee productivity and engagement.

Those improvements are necessary because the employee and customer experiences are intertwined. A positive employee experience leads to a better customer experience. A recent survey of FCW readers included a question about which aspects of digital transformation were of particular interest. The top two responses were providing a positive digital experience for customers (65%) and improving the employee experience (46%).

Similarly, digital government/digital services holds the No. 2 spot on the National Association of State CIOs' Top 10 Priorities for 2022. The workforce is another category on the list and includes “reimagining the government workforce.”

Talented employees, particularly those with technology skills, are the key to addressing current and future challenges. In a November 2021 report, the Government Accountability Office explored the benefits of creating “a digital service academy — similar to military academies — to train future civil

servants in the digital skills needed to modernize government” while noting that the government “faces a severe shortage of digital expertise in fields such as artificial intelligence, data science, application development, cybersecurity, computational biology, and robotics process automation.”

The role of cloud and other emerging technologies

Digital transformation, by its very nature, can't happen without the adoption of emerging technologies. For example, AI and automation can streamline back-office functions to improve both the employee and customer experiences. Chatbots that answer straightforward customer questions and robotic process automation for routine tasks give employees more time and energy to focus on complex activities, which leads to higher satisfaction and further improvements to customer service. In fact, Forrester predicts that 10% of the government's administrative workload will be automated in 2022.

Digital services are not static. Instead, agencies must continuously introduce innovations and improvements based on customer needs. Cloud technology was tailor-made for enabling those activities. The best cloud systems are configurable, scalable, flexible and authorized by government security programs such as FedRAMP and StateRAMP. Cloud technology also supports agencies' ability to access and analyze a wide range of data, which is foundational for implementing automation, targeting customer and employee needs, and addressing complex, data-driven issues such as economic recovery and climate change.

In addition to cloud technology, agile and iterative development is essential for the delivery of digital services. In a 2020 NASCIO survey, 39% of respondents characterized their agencies' use of agile or incremental

software development as widespread and not subject to centralized oversight or guidelines, up from 21% in 2015. A recent report by the IBM Center for the Business of Government cites programs in New York City and Austin, Texas, as models for using agile development and human-centered design to tackle challenges as varied as poverty, equity, recycling, homelessness and public safety.

Sustainability is another complex government challenge that is powered by digital transformation. Data analytics, for example, can uncover insights that will allow agencies to act more effectively in reaching net-zero carbon emission goals and developing climate action plans. It is an area where government agencies can lead the way for industry, individuals and the rest of the world.

In FCW's survey, a total of 60% of respondents said they are making decisions, developing strategies and moving forward with plans to incorporate government mandates for sustainability into their processes for buying IT products and services, with 10% saying the mandates are already reflected in their procurement processes.

The complex government and societal challenges of the past two years have heightened agencies' interest in digital transformation. In FCW's survey, 83% of respondents said that based on their experience during the pandemic, their agencies were committed to building flexible IT systems that would allow them to innovate quickly.

Delivering cutting-edge digital services requires an ongoing commitment to new technologies and a modern government workforce. All those activities improve agencies' ability to respond quickly and effectively to the next emergency while building the capacity to solve the country's most complex challenges. ■