RAISING ENGAGEMENT
to new levels

With IT modernization, agencies have an unprecedented opportunity to design a user experience that rivals what the commercial world has to offer

THE GOVERNMENT'S PUSH for digital transformation typically focuses on modernizing IT to make agencies more effective and efficient, but the benefits go beyond the IT center and the bottom line. Modernization can transform the government's ability to engage with citizens, partners and employees at a level that more closely aligns with the commercial sector.

The gap in customer engagement between the government and commercial world has widened in recent years. The 2017 American Customer Satisfaction Index gave public administration/government a score of 70.5, which places it at the bottom of the 10 economic sectors the index tracks. Additionally, a 2016 study by the Pew Research Center found that half of Americans don't trust the federal government to protect their data.

To truly meet their mission goals, agencies must go beyond updating IT and revamp their entire approach to customer engagement by providing streamlined, meaningful interactions on a wide range of platforms.

Customer-centric offerings are a key focus of the President's Management Agenda, released in March 2018. Under the fourth cross-agency priority goal of improving customer services, the document states that "federal agencies will provide a modern, streamlined and responsive customer experience across government, comparable to leading private-sector organizations."

The agenda also specifies using technology to increase communication between agencies and citizens and transforming "the customer experience by improving the usability and reliability of our federal government's most critical digital services."

At the state and local level, three of the activities listed on the National Association of State CIOs' Top 10 Priorities for 2019 reference improving the user experience for internal and external customers. According to the results of NASCIO's 2018 State CIO Survey, agencies' digital transformation strategies have evolved beyond simply moving services online.

"State leaders aspire to have seamless citizen transactions, increase engagements, provide mobile services, establish common online identities, and enable crowdsourcing and digital assistants to help navigate services," the survey report states.

Personalized, intelligent services

To keep up with customers' demands for a level of engagement comparable to the commercial world, agencies need faster access to information, streamlined workflows, automated processes, and the ability to communicate and collaborate effectively both internally and externally.

Many technological advancements are driving that transformation, and one of the

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Modernization and customer engagement **by the numbers**

$617 million
Amount the U.S. Digital Service expects modernization projects to save over five years

1,475
Number of labor years USDS expects to redirect toward higher-value work

35%
State CIOs who cite complex legacy systems or manual processes as a challenge to delivering services

78%
State CIOs who cite improving citizen services as the strategic or operational issue driving interest in automation software

70.5 out of 100
Score public administration/government received on the 2017 American Customer Satisfaction Index

Sources: ACSI, National Association of State CIOs, White House

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key facilitators is cloud computing. Forty-seven percent of agencies actively use cloud services, according to Gartner, and IDC researchers expect federal cloud investments to reach about $3.3 billion in 2021.

Cloud technology offers stability, flexibility and increased efficiency. It enables agencies to gradually replace legacy technology and deploy new services faster in the web-based and mobile formats users increasingly expect. Most importantly, it frees workers to focus on engaging with customers rather than maintaining technology.

In addition, cloud platforms facilitate agencies' use of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence.

In Mississippi, residents can use the MyMS app to receive personalized reminders or general alerts and save frequently accessed content. MyMS users can also communicate with the state's digital voice assistant via Amazon Alexa and Google Home smart devices so that they can set a reminder for renewing their driver's license, receive local traffic alerts or get contact information for state agencies.

That kind of laser focus takes the guesswork out of what users want and helps the agency gain a clearer

understanding of its constituents, which is essential to providing better user experiences.

A better employee experience

The Agriculture Department is another model for how digital transformation is improving the user experience. Last year, USDA unveiled Farmers.gov, a mobile-friendly, interactive website that puts more than 150 federal web resources in one place and allows access through seven digital platforms. Farmers can use the portal to find nearby USDA office locations, fill out forms and view a customizable dashboard that integrates agriculture-related data, maps and tools.

Government employees are also benefiting from more user-friendly offerings. NASA's Shared Services Center relies on a bot called George Washington to handle routine procurement processes. The bot has an email account and credentials to access operational systems, enabling it to carry out tasks such as logging human-approved budget information. The center has two other bots: John Adams handles finance-related work and Pioneer creates procurement requests for the Office of the CIO. The bots' work allows employees to focus on higher-level activities.

In Washington state, the Health Care Authority's SmartHealth portal helps employees, spouses and eligible retirees track their physical, emotional, financial and work/life well-being. HCA receives aggregated data that can highlight problems, such as employee populations at risk of diabetes, and can offer appropriate interventions, such as programs on healthy eating. Since the portal was launched in 2015, employee turnover has fallen by 25 percent, overtime hours have decreased by 37 percent, and employees have taken 10 percent fewer sick days.

In the end, although the President's Management Agenda highlights the deficiencies of the government's historical approach to IT, including its reliance on outdated systems and its struggle to keep pace with rapidly evolving technology, the document is also optimistic about the government's ability to succeed.

The key is recognizing that digital transformation and the user experience go hand in hand. Support for both exists at the highest levels of government, and the success of projects already underway sends a clear message: The public sector is ready for user-centric IT products and digital services. There's no doubt its customers are, too. ■