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How Agencies Are Meeting Citizens' Needs Today, Tomorrow and Beyond

Public sector agencies are going digital in the hopes of improving workflows and attracting top talent.

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Government agencies are leveraging the power of technology to provide personalized experiences, and at Carahsoft's [Customer Experiences \(CX\) Summit](#), leaders convened to share tips and tricks.

Digitization is quickly gaining ground among federal, state and local agencies due in part to the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically reshaped public habits, as citizens purchased homes, cars and groceries all from the palms of their hands. In addition, federal employees logged in to their laptops from the comfort of their homes. Behind the scenes of these seemingly simple acts, IT leaders worked to quickly digitize existing processes to ensure government operations continued while the world practiced social distancing.

Digitization sounds simple in theory, but it requires federal, state and local leaders to invest in foundational aspects like user testing, pilot programs and journey mapping.

"We're trying to build that cycle of usability, journey mapping and moving into building stuff and then iterating very fast based on that feedback, based on the analytics and the data. If you don't bake all that stuff in at the very beginning, you're too late, and you're not going to get it," explained Michael Rupert, Chief Technology Officer for the District of Columbia (D.C.).

Government organizations should focus on collecting feedback and leveraging pilot groups to build programs, processes and procedures that ultimately drive benefit to the end user.

"It's not digitization to digitize a process, but it's digitization to deliver value and services to those who depend on it the most," said Evan Anderson, Regional Vice President of Public Sector at OwnBackup.

Delivering value starts with understanding the different touchpoints that a customer moves through and extends to understanding where a product fits into a larger ecosystem of services, products and processes.

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"It's important for the policy and operational folks to understand how that [product] will work and help people get back to what I like to call the first principles of 'let's not just digitize parts of a manual process, but let's use this opportunity to reimagine how we can provide this service,'" said Joel Nantais, Bureau of Consular Affairs Customer Experience Strategist at the Department of State.

As government leaders start to dream about what's possible, next-generation technologies can help them leverage the power of data to build data-driven solutions.

"Generative AI is very exciting," explained Phil Jackson, General Manager at Adobe. "Government is coming to us and asking lots of questions. They want the datasets they have to be included in the models. It's just a very exciting moment, and I think it has a tremendous potential in terms of accelerating many of these initiatives."

Case Study: Passport Renewals at the Department of State

On June 7, Rena Bitter, Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, [testified](#) in front of the United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. In her testimony, Bitter highlighted that the State Department is seeing an increase in applications: “In Fiscal Year 2022, we issued a record 22 million passport books and cards. We are on track to surpass that achievement in Fiscal Year 2023.”

At the State Department’s “240 overseas posts and 29 domestic passport agencies and centers,” employees rely on legacy, paper-based processes. Nantais and his team, however, are looking toward a future where citizens can leverage technology to apply for and renew passports. So far, the State Department’s assembled user test groups and is leveraging the learning from these discussions to build and iterate on existing processes.

In addition to building digital services, the Department of State is looking toward an interoperable future where citizens can easily apply for passports alongside programs like TSA PreCheck.

“[We’re looking at starting to] break down some of those agency bureaucratic barriers: Because that’s not what citizens care about,” Nantais said. “All they’re thinking about are the services that are afforded to them by their government.”

Harnessing the Power of the 21st Century Ideas Act

The 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act (IDEA), signed into law in 2018, dictates that federal agencies should make a concerted effort to redesign public-facing websites to be more

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accessible. Accessible websites work toward building equity, a core element of the [President’s Management Agenda](#).

Equity also means meeting citizens where they are, and accessible websites won’t help those without reliable internet access.

Per [the FCC](#), approximately “19 million Americans or — 6 percent of the population — still lack access to fixed broadband service at threshold speeds. In rural areas, nearly one-fourth of the population — 14.5 million people — lack access to this service. In tribal areas, nearly one-third of the population lacks access. Even in areas where broadband is available, approximately 100 million Americans still do not subscribe.” This digital divide creates a unique challenge for federal, state and local leaders who must balance the needs of disconnected and hyper-connected users.

“For many of our services, our customer base is every U.S. citizen, so really thinking about that equity piece is important for us,” Nantais said. “Digital is not always going to be a solution for everybody, so keeping that in mind and thinking about that is important for us as [we move] forward.”

For public sector agencies, balancing the desire for digital-first services and the need to support legacy, paper-based processes is no easy task. Leaders must also consider the security risks of leveraging next-generation technologies.

“One of the challenges I’ve observed is trying to harmonize innovation and security simultaneously. How do we make sure that these citizens receive services, but so that we’re not introducing additional risk,” Anderson said.

In addition to considering the security ramifications of implementing new technologies or processes, leaders should plan for confusion. Citizens may not be familiar with the technology — meet your citizens where they are.

A perfect example of this is D.C.’s [“Tech Together”](#) program, which provides residents with educational opportunities where they can learn more about next-generation technologies. For example, Rupert highlights the impact the program has had on D.C.’s senior citizens who have learned how to leverage CVS’ online portal to order medication and have it delivered to their doorstep.

Other panelists further emphasized the importance of creating programs designed to support legacy and

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Phil Jackson, General Manager,
Adobe

next-generation outreach.

“There are people out there who want a letter in the mail,” Jackson said. “And there are people who want to ask Alexa, ‘What government services can my local or federal government provide me with?’ You need to use technology to choreograph all of those experiences so they’re relevant, accurate and up-to-date.”

Meeting your citizens where they are is a vital action in building programs that are not only equitable but actually provide value to the end user. And for Anderson, breaking down these barriers starts with thinking about users, both internal and external to the agency.

“It’s really important to start from the end of the process and work backward and to create feedback loops for iterative improvements. It doesn’t have to be perfect initially,” he said.

As federal, state and local leaders look to build programs and meet the needs of their constituents, savvy decision-makers should look to marry their test groups with powerful platforms designed to support data analytics at scale.

“Making sure you’ve got those foundational elements right is key,” Jackson said. “Use analytics to inform your design process, and use that to iterate, improve and increase the performance rate of that experience.”

Discover how [Adobe](#) and [OwnBackUp](#) can help your agency meet the needs of your citizens today, tomorrow and in the future.