

# NEW SOLUTIONS TO OLD PROBLEMS

With the public's help, agencies can revitalize their approach to tackling challenges.



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**T**HE GOVERNMENT is now light-years ahead of where it used to be in recognizing the value of data as an asset and embracing the importance of citizen engagement. Agencies have come to realize that by asking for the public's help, they are bound to find new and interesting ways to solve problems they haven't been able to solve before.

Clearly, the old way of doing things doesn't generate results. PDFs of static reports — or worse yet, XML data files — are not engaging. Citizens might be able to answer one or two basic questions based on a static document. However, interactive, self-service technology evolved from the realization that magic happens in that second, third or fourth layer of questions. When we allow the general public to ask those questions, they can truly become change agents.

There is tremendous value in specialist-oriented hackathons and approaches that do not require participants to have a particular skill set. For instance, you don't have to understand the analytics behind an infographic in *USA Today* to grasp the story it's telling. It's so intuitive readers can easily glean a lot of information.

Agencies can take that same concept and put it into something more interactive. To succeed, they must keep in mind that data should be:

- ▶ **Accessible:** Can people easily find the data, or is it buried someplace on a website? And once people find it, is it in a format they can actually use?

- ▶ **Engaging:** The information should spark an interest or encourage creative thinking. Topics that affect people's daily lives — such as health care, education, transportation, and family and child care — tend to generate more feedback and interactivity.

- ▶ **Intuitive:** The dataset should not require people to follow a complex set of instructions or have a deep underlying knowledge of the

topic. When we design for the analytic-minded individual, we're missing an opportunity to engage more citizens on a more frequent basis.

For example, officials at the State of Ohio created an interactive budget portal to help interested citizens easily understand how the state is spending its money. By doing so, officials have given citizens the ability to start with a high-level question and hone in on an answer as their findings lead them to more specific questions.

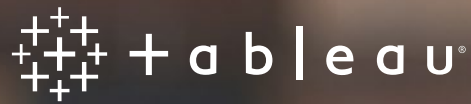
None of that interactivity can happen, though, if agencies are holding onto outdated policies, legacy technology and warring opinions on data access. Agencies must strive for a culture that fosters collaboration and trust between the business and IT teams.

Likewise, industry partnerships should be based on collaboration and trust. Agencies should seek out companies that are conducting research and development around data and analytics because those providers are driving innovation.

Government agencies should also not forget to tap resources closer to home. In these budget-constrained times, employees are a powerful, often overlooked resource. Some of them fell into roles as data scientists or analysts because they were curious and passionate about a topic. Agencies should make the most of those employees' energy and motivation. Their efforts can contribute to timely service delivery and better outcomes.

Digital engagement offers important opportunities for agencies and citizens alike. Ultimately, open portals, bidirectional communication and sharing ideas will lead to policy recommendations, program improvements and a better overall experience for citizens and employees.

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