

# A New Dialogue on Automation

## States and localities consider new tools for efficiency

**F**rom digital services to public works to transportation to finances, automation technology has the potential to revolutionize government.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the conversation surrounding automation in government featured a lot of skepticism. For some, automation seemed too difficult or risky to implement. For others, it represented a threat to human workers. And for many, change in general is hard to embrace because it means leaving behind the familiar and venturing toward the unknown.

But when COVID infection rates skyrocketed, and when programs like unemployment insurance (UI) faced unprecedented spikes in demand, governments felt compelled to consider and adopt technologies they may have once resisted.

And so, in 2022, the dialogue on automation has a much different tone. The focus has shifted toward identifying opportunities, challenges and best practices so that agencies can figure out where automation fits best. While the pandemic undoubtedly played a role in inspiring the public sector to take a closer look at the benefits of automation, some of the credit could be given to new blood in government.

“The folks who are becoming middle managers and even directors in some communities were born in the technology era,” says Bob Bennett, senior fellow with the Center for Digital Government. “In many

cases, adopting technology like automation is almost a generational challenge. It’s going to happen eventually. In some communities it takes more time because of the experience level and the familiarity with the existing technology that your supervisors or some of your senior staff will have.”

### **COVID-19 and the Rise of Government Automation**

During the pandemic, many state government organizations tested the potential of automation in the form of chatbots enabled by artificial intelligence (AI). This surge in the use of digital assistants came primarily in response to overwhelming amounts of constituent interactions with health and UI agencies that caused major disruptions at call centers. For the most part, chatbots appeared to deliver on their promise. According to survey data cited in a 2021 report from the National Association of State Chief Information Officers, the Center for Digital Government and IBM, 65% of state-level respondents said tools like chatbots lived up to expectations.

That same report also showed incredible growth of robotic process automation (RPA), which executes rote tasks much faster than humans, in state government during the pandemic. In 2019, RPA wasn’t commonly utilized by state agencies. Two years later, states were using RPA for activities as diverse as inputting medical data,

generating application forms for child services, accounting, business-rule processing, transferring pandemic relief funds, creating security scorecards and more.

Local governments also did their share of deploying automation during the height of the pandemic. For the first time, some localities utilized automation tools to create an app-like experience for residents to pay bills and conduct other city business. In addition, Bennett says the localities that leveraged AI to enhance 311 operations did “wonderfully well.”

“We used automation in the Unified Government of Wyandotte County and Kansas City, Kansas, to manage the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines,” Bennett says. “It allowed us to very rapidly get the word out to thousands of residents. We successfully inoculated 100,000 out of 160,000 people in the city within the first eight months. A similar solution was used in Arlington County, Virginia. And they are continuing to evolve with that system to expand to other parts of local government because it worked so well during the pandemic.”

### **Can Automation Solve the Government Workforce Problem?**

For state and local governments across the United States, workforce management is top of mind. Staff shortages are depleting public agencies at historical levels. One of the main reasons is burnout,



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according to recent research from Eagle Hill Consulting: 65% of surveyed government employees said they felt burned out compared to 44% of surveyed private sector employees.

This troubling workforce situation has turned one of the common fears about automation on its head. That is, traditionally U.S. officials have expressed concerns about automation replacing the American worker. But if labor-intensive, monotonous processes are overwhelming government staff, automation could be a potential savior when it comes to recruiting and retaining public sector workers.

For example, Bennett says he can see a future where decision support technologies will allow city managers to repurpose existing personnel to meet emergent and long-term needs.

"Maybe some cities will even start combining water and public works teams, because some of that work is redundant," Bennett says. "The staff right now is separated. As we continue to have to focus on personnel efficiencies, that might be a way to meet that challenge."

### ***The Prospect of Automation in Government***

To make automation in government work, Bennett recommends going straight to constituents and asking them what they would like to see automated. Community input can help managers embrace change if they feel reluctant to adopt automation.

"Ask residents what's more important," Bennett says. "Do I need to first automate my 311 system? Or do I need to automate my service delivery for sewers, maybe for sewer bills and ticketing? Or should I look

at some other infrastructure improvements? Get constituent input."

Bennett also advises government decisionmakers to communicate to their teams about any plans to incorporate automation. It's important to demonstrate to the rank and file the same value proposition that has led a leadership team to make a change. Change can only become permanent if people are included at the table and feel that they understand why the organization is evolving.

Automation shouldn't be looked at as new or potentially threatening. Rather, it should be viewed as part of a continuing theme for government, where agencies apply industry best practices in order to provide critical services to constituents.

"Using data or data-informed tools can make us more responsive," Bennett says. "That's been true since we figured out how to use a telephone. It's been true since we figured out how to remotely read a water meter. And it's going to continue to evolve."

## ***What Automation Tools Are Local Areas Already Using?***

	Not in use; no plans to use	Not in use; plan to implement in 12-18 months	In use/mature; no plans to upgrade in 12-18 months	In use; plan to upgrade in 12-18 months
<b>Cities</b>				
AI/Machine Learning	9%	31%	23%	36%
Digital Assistants	34%	28%	22%	16%
Robotic Process Automation (RPA)	52%	25%	14%	9%
<b>Counties</b>				
AI/Machine Learning	15%	23%	20%	43%
Digital Assistants	43%	26%	13%	18%
Robotic Process Automation (RPA)	59%	18%	13%	10%

Source: Center for Digital Government's 2021 Digital Cities and Counties surveys; Note: Figures are rounded