Executive Viewpoint

A Conversation with DENNIS PAPULA

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How is the Program Support Center using technology to improve engagement?
The Program Support Center (PSC) is a governmentwide shared-services center, and we support every Cabinet-level agency. Our services run the gamut across three portfolios. Real estate logistics and operations is one, and the second is financial management. In fact, we disperse close to $2 billion a day in grants. The third portfolio is federal occupational health, which, for example, supports over 300 clinics in federal buildings across the country.

Our customers are our colleagues at HHS and at other federal agencies. PSC partners with our customers on everything from digital archiving to negotiating contracts, from financial reporting to storing and distributing medical supplies, and from evaluating employees for their fitness for duty to delivering comprehensive occupational health solutions to federal employees.

We are not a mandatory source for many of those services, especially outside HHS. We always think about how we can provide a commercial experience because, in some cases, we are competing against commercial entities. In addition, people bring their expectations for a commercial customer experience to work. We can’t separate that anymore.

Our experience with government shapes how we perceive the value of government. We cannot divorce customer service from that value and from the public’s need to feel confident in the government’s ability to deliver services. Therefore, the customer’s journey must be at the heart of everything we do.

Unfortunately, in government, there’s a perception that we tend to deliver yesterday’s technology tomorrow. One of my jobs is to change that perception. Under the leadership of Director Al Sample, our strategic goals are modernizing technology and improving our partnerships with the customers we serve. Those two drivers are of paramount importance to everything we do.

How have you gone about improving user engagement?
We follow a process that begins with understanding our customers. The second step is being honest with ourselves and ruthlessly addressing any inefficiencies in our systems. We have to go into it with the attitude that how we do business today is not how we should be doing business. That means acknowledging that there are areas for improvement and then doing something about them.

For example, the GOcard program is one of the areas where we’ve seen a lot of success in terms of modernization and automation. We have over 80,000 customers for this program, which streamlines the process for federal employees to receive subsidies for using public transportation to commute to work.

We challenged ourselves to improve how we deliver advanced help for those customers. Until recently, we were sending email messages back and forth to resolve customers’ issues. That’s not very efficient, and it’s not a very pleasant experience for the customer. By automating some steps and incorporating case management, we’ve been able to streamline the process and give our customers transparency into how their issues are being resolved.

We can no longer say that we can’t change a process because this is the way we’ve always done it, and it’s too difficult to deploy new technology. Those excuses are
High-Impact Government Engagement

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...falling apart very quickly, especially as we move onto cloud platforms.

We all know that citizen-facing applications have opportunities for improvement, but the government’s own internal administrative systems are even more problematic. If those systems don’t work well or were not built around the end user, agencies pay a price in terms of efficiency and satisfaction. You have less-than-productive workers who are not engaged.

**How do you scale up as well as widen the scope of services employees and customers use?**

The key is taking advantage of cloud-based products. They allow us to focus on optimizing services, ensuring user adoption and improving customer service — instead of the more traditional IT model of buy, build and deploy infrastructure.

The amount of time and the opportunity cost associated with building infrastructure usually came at the expense of improving the customer and user experience. Let’s say I have 100 hours to work on a project. In traditional IT, 40 of those hours might have been spent buying the hardware, configuring the hardware, deploying the software, then talking to the customer or the business process owner about the changes they needed to make. And then finally we’d start talking to end users about the product.

With cloud-based technology, we’re not completely eliminating the first part of the process because there are things we still need to do from a risk management perspective. But by using cloud platforms, we’re able to take some of the time that was going toward infrastructure management and instead devote it to business optimization and improving the customer experience.

We can also test an idea with a small population first. Then if a cloud platform does indeed optimize a process and provide a better end-user experience, we can expand very quickly to a broader population — as opposed to the old ways of doing things when we had to buy servers and make sure we had enough rack space.

**What are the most important steps PSC has taken to modernize?**

We take it very seriously that we have to earn our business. We are continually thinking about how to provide competitive offerings and services.

In any kind of IT modernization, we can’t simply lift and shift our current processes to the cloud and expect them to work well. We have to be willing to challenge the way we’ve done business and take the time to understand the customer journey.

It is also important to engage our stakeholders early in the process and use customer-driven management practices every step of the way. We need to move away from the traditional waterfall mindset that we must know all the requirements before we can build anything and instead adopt a more agile approach that has the end-user experience at the heart of how we develop and deploy a system or product.

That is a fundamental shift in how we’re approaching modernization and customer engagement.