

THE AGENCY TRANSITION TO DIGITAL: ROLL-OUT OR REVOLUTION?

Moving to a digital services culture is as much a philosophical shift as it is a technological transformation.

THE TRANSITION government agencies are making to delivering digital services is often referred to as a cultural experience—not a roll-out or upgrade. It's actually all of those things. But instituting digital services is more like a revolution, with all the passion and re-education that implies.

"We're not out to transform services just to have new services. We're really out to transform people's lives," said Aaron Snow, executive director of 18F, a fee-for-service government office that helps other agencies build, buy and share digital services. "And to transform the services that improve people's lives, we have to transform some entrenched practices." Snow spoke at the Citizen Engagement Summit: Delivering on the Promise of Digital Services, held March 2 in Washington, D.C.

However, transforming entrenched, legacy practices often takes deep institutional resources and leverage. Recognizing that, the GSA recently merged three of its technology groups, the 18F digital services agency, the Office of Citizen Services and Innovative Technologies (OCSIT), and the Presidential Innovation Fellows program into a program called the Technology Transformation Service (TTS).

Federal CIO Tony Scott said the newly christened triad would "strengthen the way federal agencies develop, buy and share cutting edge digital solutions," according to a GSA announcement.

In a May 3 blog post, GSA administrator Denise Turner Roth called the new services organization, "a foundation for the federal government's digital transformation," and an opportunity to partner with other agencies and assist them in their own attempts to transform. "By moving these programs into a new service," she said, "we are demonstrating a commitment to make agile, user-centered delivery of technology the way we do business moving forward."

The effort will require money and manpower. In remarks made while introducing the fiscal 2017 federal budget, administration officials highlighted upcoming IT priorities, including "delivering smarter information technology, world-class customer service and stronger engagement with communities and citizens."

The administration also appears to be putting its money and resources where its mouth is. Next year, the administration plans to spend \$35 million more on the U.S. Digital Service (USDS), \$105 million for digital services teams at 25 agencies, and even more for digital channels throughout the federal government. Citing the need for more IT specialists to pursue its digital goals, the administration said it will also aim to hire 500 top "digital service experts" by January 2017 to work with agencies on their highest priority projects.

Those additional specialists would reinforce the U.S. Digital Service, a group of entrepreneurs assembled in 2014 to work on special projects. Since then, USDS experts have worked on several key projects, including restoring the State Department's global Consolidated Consular Database after a worldwide outage and laying the groundwork for secure access to all IRS digital services.

In preparing for the 2016 budget, the administration also released all budget data in machine-readable formats on GitHub, a web site for hosting open source projects. Altogether, the technical expertise initiatives have saved more than \$3.5 billion, according to administration officials.

Those savings have helped sustain the principles GSA has adopted during the course of the government's digital transition. Those principles include managing data instead of documents, using shared platforms to reduce costs, providing users with access to information anytime on multiple devices, and ensuring secure information delivery.

Using these guidelines, IT managers are developing digital systems they believe will help build strong technology cultures. Environmental Protection Agency CIO Ann Duncan, speaking at the Citizen Engagement Summit, said creating a digital services culture requires a radically different thought and decision-making processes. The EPA is turning to user-centered design, modular practices and agile development instead of sticking with familiar waterfall methods. Streamlining government processes also helps encourage an agency digital services culture, she said.

The mechanics of digital transformation also requires ideas and methods for measuring progress. The U.S. Census Bureau,

for example, does more than 100 continuous surveys each year by phone, online, mail and interviews. It also solicits feedback via satisfaction surveys, webinars, social media and call centers.

“We want to make sure the information was repeatable, significant, and that we had the right information,” said Lisa Wolfisch, Deputy Director for the Center for New Media and Promotion at the U.S. Census Bureau, who spoke at the Citizen Engagement Summit. “Technology isn’t always the

problem—it’s how we listen to our customers.”

The I8F’s Snow, who will serve as deputy commissioner of TTS, also acknowledged similar cultural changes ahead. “Cultural change happens when we trust in methodologies that work, when we reduce anxiety about the new and unknown, and when we serve up example after example that signal that this way is better, cheaper, faster, less risky,” he said. “That’s how we spur adoption and ultimately transformation.”

THE CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT TOOLKIT



DIGITAL DESIGN

Digital services must be designed with the user in mind—which is to say, the design must be dynamic, tailored to the requirements of every touchpoint and every platform, and continually optimized.



DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT PLATFORM

Many agencies have had the experience of developing new digital services only to struggle to reach the intended audience. The solution is a digital engagement platform that keeps you connected with your constituents and drives traffic to your resources.



CIVIC TECH

In developing digital services, it is essential to align the public-facing services with the core internal processes that support them. The digital services toolkit should include workflow automation, application programming interfaces and related tools.



CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

One reason to adopt a rigorous customer relationship discipline is that it will improve an agency’s reputation with the public. Another reason is that it can improve the efficiency and productivity of employees, freeing up resources to support the larger mission.



CONTENT SHARING

Information is the life stream of every government agency. To work effectively and collaboratively, employees need the ability to share content quickly and securely, no matter where they are or what platform they are using. Without that ability, innovation is a non-starter.



BLENDED COLLABORATION

In some cases, employees prefer asynchronous collaboration, so they can interact as time allows, while at other times they prefer a direct, synchronous approach. The best collaboration toolkit includes both options.