Building Trust in Government Through Digital Transformation

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Table of Contents

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The Demand for Digital

Today, government agencies at every level have received mandates to go digital and innovate new ways to serve their citizens. They are often pointed to the private sector and asked to emulate the high standards being set by consumer expectations, but this makes for an unfair comparison because government agencies have to manage obstacles that the private sector never encounters. Digital transformation, regardless of sector, is an organizational reorientation that uses digital technology to put users first. However, there are different motivations for digital transformation. Private companies seek profit, but what is the equivalent for government? This question gets to the heart of what civic service really means: providing services for the public that are relevant, reliable and efficient. Digital transformation plays a critical role in today's government — but its mindset, goals and long term plans should center on trust.

Build Trust Through Digital Transformation

A report from 18F shows that people, especially the most vulnerable in our society, have difficulty trusting the government's digital services due to privacy concerns, a lack of transparency, an overwhelming amount of unorganized information, inconsistent application processes between agencies or previous negative experiences. Digital transformation strategies that address these issues will help agencies deliver intuitive experiences that are tailored to citizens' needs, which over time will build trust through the accumulation of positive interactions. This is the true impact of digital technology for government: delivering services that cultivate citizen relationships for future engagement.

Technology is changing our world. People are used to being connected to the internet and bouncing from computer to smartphone to tablet and other new devices. Most agencies believe they are expected to take advantage of current technology to make services easier to access in people's day-to-day lives. In fact, a study from Deloitte University Press shows that agencies list 'citizen demands' as one of their primary drivers for transformation. By meeting these demands, government has an opportunity to regain public trust that has been lost over the years due to confusing processes, siloed information and frustrating interactions with government services. For government, digital transformation is more than digitizing paper processes. It means putting people at the heart of what your agency does in order to rebuild trust.

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Understanding the Trust Gap

How people experience government digital services influences their trust and confidence in agencies. There are two main reasons for the gap in trust between people and government:

- People are accessing government services during high-stress situations; any failure to meet expectations can damage trust.

- Expectations are formed by the private sector's services, but digital transformation is more challenging for agencies because they have to navigate regulations and policies that the private sector doesn't need to worry about.

When people try to access government services, it's often during unpleasant or difficult situations, such as reporting an infrastructure issue or navigating immigration, taxes, child welfare or other services. They're frustrated and searching for solutions online without knowing if the results are trustworthy or up-to-date. They may be asking friends and family who have gone through similar situations, and receiving advice colored by isolated negative experiences. They could be doing all this within the privacy of their home, or they could be doing it at a slow-loading public library computer with a 30-minute time limit.

When the government fails to meet expectations in these moments of need, it is public trust that takes the hit.

As stated at the beginning, there is a tendency these days to point to the e-commerce space of the private sector and say that they have raised the standards for digital experiences. The implication is that people are being unreasonable when they expect the same level of service from their government.

But once we consider when and why people access government services, it's clear that what people are asking for is very reasonable: simple, fast and transparent processes that give them confidence that the government is working for them.

Right now, there's a clear gap between the experiences government is delivering and what citizens actually want, but it's not because agencies are unwilling to provide. When agencies design service processes, they are required to do it from within an environment that needs to satisfy many regulations that have been implemented over the years in order to reduce risk. In other words, systems are designed from the position of what's best for the agency.

In the private sector, this is always pitched as a negative thing. The customer is king, right? But in government, those processes are evidence that agencies are working to put citizens first. That's why those systems exist: to ensure that the

public sector is using taxpayer money responsibly. Government does need to focus on what is good for agencies, because part of an agency's duty is to be stable for years on end. But are these internally designed experiences useful for citizens once they're translated into the digital space, or are they just draining resources? Where can agencies and citizens find the intersection that provides both relevant services and secure internal processes?

The intersection is in those moments of immediate need, when citizens first initiate contact. Every online interaction between the government and a citizen is a chance to either build trust up or tear it down. Those moments of need are critical because that is where perceptions are formed. Digital services are a way to demonstrate that agencies are able to provide valuable services while also opening up opportunities for future citizen engagement.

What Makes a Digital Service Trustworthy?

If people are forming their opinions in the day-to-day moments of need, then that's where digital transformation needs to start. After all, people in the US are increasingly online and connected. By making day-to-day web and mobile experiences more intuitive, agencies can demonstrate their understanding of people's needs.

The private sector has identified simple, concrete best practices that can be immediately implemented for better digital experiences. Not every problem requires complex solutions, and focusing on getting the details right can often have bigger gains than revamping an entire system. Here are some of the key tactics that agencies can apply across their current web and mobile services to create experiences that build trust for citizens.

1. **Modern design and interfaces** Interfaces that are simple and modern reassure people that they have found services that are up-to-date, relevant and managed by official agencies.

2. **Plain language** Plain and friendly language in place of government jargon helps citizens feel that they are interacting with real people, rather than a faceless agency. Try to convey the message that the agency is on the citizen's side to make services feel more approachable.

3. **Easy access to help** Offer plenty of options for assistance, such as self-service portals, call centers or directions to a local agency office. One of the reasons for distrust among people is the worr y that, if they make a mistake on a form, they will be denied services they should qualify for. Make it easy for people to ask questions and receive accurate answers.

4. **Clear actions and next steps** When a user arrives at a site, it should be immediately obvious what actions they should take. By laying out clear steps, you can reassure users that they are following the correct process, whether they're filling out an application or just viewing a community calendar.

5. **Pre-screenings** When applicable, short pre-screenings that confirm whether people qualify for services can save time and reduce later frustration. This can be as simple as a short survey or list of requirements for people to review.

6. **Familiar processes** Many people have made online payments through an e-retailer, but not through a government service (payments on the DMV site, for instance). If you can mimic that purchase process so that it looks familiar to people, they will be more confident that the payment went through correctly.

7. **Consistency** When applicable, agencies should make sure they have a similar look and feel across every device on which their services may be used. This can be extended to agencies that work together — for instance, a city-wide style template that lets citizens know they're within the local government's web space. Agencies can also share data on the back end so citizens aren't submitting the same info repeatedly for different services.
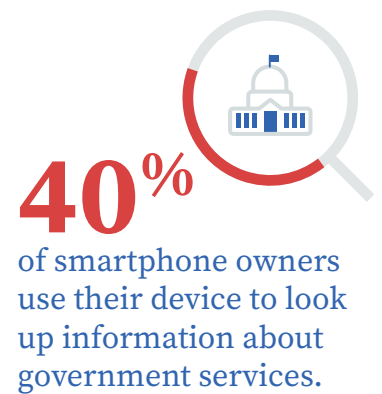
The method of service delivery is worth noting as well. Government mobile apps allow agencies to meet people where they increasingly spend hours of their time — their smartphones. According to Pew Research Center, 40% of smartphone owners use their device to look up information about government services. The private sector invests in mobile apps because of their value in developing customer engagement, a concept which city governments have been able to apply by changing fraud hotlines into mobile apps.[1]

40% of smartphone owners use their device to look up information about government services.

Users feel more secure that they're anonymous, and since the app is in their pocket, it fits naturally into their routine (rather than being forced to spend time on a phone call). Cities also benefit from this change because they're ultimately reducing the financial burden of waste and fraud.

Going further, great digital services find ways to meet people's next needs. Someone filing for a marriage license, for instance, may appreciate being offered more information on how to change their name, such as a checklist that covers all the agencies they'll need to contact including the DMV, social security card companies, etc. This kind of forethought demonstrates an effort to understand the people being served and what their immediate needs are.

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1   pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2016/04/22/new-apps-help-taxpayers-report-waste-fraud-and-abuse/

Developing the Right Digital Skills

Beneath the surface of user-centric, friendly digital services, one of the keys to sustaining trust is to take a careful look at how your agency designs and delivers these services on the back end. Research from the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation shows that, in the government space, IT only makes significant improvements to productivity and efficiency when paired with organizational change.[2] Because this level of change is so difficult to enact in government, agencies sometimes try to bypass it and deploy new technology on its own, hoping to still see some part of its promised productivity gains. This approach runs the risk of investing money in solutions that ultimately don't benefit the people agencies aim to serve.

The digital skills your team needs to develop aren't just about coding or hardware; they're about understanding the current technology landscape and embracing the innovation processes that others have found successful, such as the idea that more eyes on a project is a good thing, that good ideas won't necessarily come from the people sitting in the room with you, and that development should be fast, transparent and open to empirical feedback, no matter what stage the project is in. These are the principles that allow tech innovators to create the products they do, and government agencies will benefit from incorporating the same ideas into their own digital strategies.

Being open to feedback and collaboration is particularly important for agencies seeking to rebuild trust and increase citizen engagement. One way agencies are embracing this is hackathons, weekend-long marathons in which coders come together in order to develop new solutions to problems. These often involve sets of open data provided by the organizers and solutions developed either as web services or mobile apps. Government agencies have been able to use hackathons to generate new ideas from the community and introduce fresh perspectives to their internal team. The true value of hackathons isn't in creating solutions in a single weekend, but in raising awareness and excitement, which in turn can lead to confidence, collaboration, proactive engagement and trust.

Creating a new culture of collaboration, both internally and within the community, builds trust for citizens who are more open to interacting with government beyond general awareness of what services are available. It would be nice to simply point

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2   www2.itif.org/2015-next-wave-it-state-government.pdf?_ga=1.146581810.768734579.1426969113

to the end user experience of digital services and say that having a clear plan will restore trust. But government services, even digital ones, are powered by people, so IT plans need t o enhance the experience and knowledge of your agency's staff through collaboration and inviting external input on your agency's work.

After this, you need the right technology. Even something that seems simple, like a self service portal, can benefit from modern development practices and standards. Open source is often favored by agencies because of its lightweight design, flexibility and cost-effectiveness. The best choice will depend on the goals of your agency and its current systems, but striving to choose modern and innovative technology will create a better platform as digital services continue to evolve.

Spotlight: Mobile PA Challenge

The Mobile PA Challenge began as a push to recruit millennials for open IT positions in Pennsylvania state government.* Pennsylvania expanded the project to cover a semester instead of a weekend, adjusting the standard model to better fit their needs. The project works with colleges to reach out to students, who receive recognition and professional development in exchange for their work. The benefits are multifold:

- The emerging millennial workforce has an opportunity to see what the state government is doing with IT, which may influence their future career choices.

- The challenge builds an air of excitement and collaboration that creates a positive perception of the government's use of IT.

- It utilizes modern development practices that favor open data and community input, both of which fortify public trust.

The final code that students produce is handed over to Pennsylvania's internal IT team for future development, which ensures that the project won't be abandoned due to lack of support. For 2015, the end result was Get Help Now (apps.ddap. pa.gov/gethelpnow), a mobile web app with information on drug and alcohol addiction treatment, designed by three students from Harrisburg Area Community College and launched by the PA team. Overall, the hackathon is well-thought out, taking into consideration both public expectation for collaborative design projects as well as how to be flexible and adjust the challenge as needed.

*govtech.com/state/Mobile-Challenge-Helps-Pennsylvania-Tap-Millennial-Talent.html

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Initiating Citizen Engagement

Engagement is a two-way process, but people aren't going to engage if they feel it's a waste of their time. Some feedback can be passively obtained through measuring data and analytics, but for real engagement, agencies also need to find a way to receive individual feedback from people. By putting the work into developing better services, you can make the first step in repairing any negative perceptions and initiate new engagement.

Transparency and accountability make it easy for people to gain a look at what goes on in government at no personal cost. This is important for those who distrust government because it gives them a safe method to ask questions and ease suspicions or anxieties. Here are some of the general principles and ideas gaining ground in government today.

1. **Open data**
   People want insight into things like government salaries and police data. Open data includes presenting the story behind that data, rather than daily dumps of numbers, so that people can understand the impact of what they're seeing and how it affects them. A good example of this is the College Scorecard website, the Department of Education's site for national college data, which allows students to compare college information while also delivering big picture statistics, such as the expected lifetime earnings of college graduates compared to non-graduates.

2. **Accountability**
   Share details on project statuses, survey results, future plans, and the thought behind current service offerings, including why certain pieces of information are needed, how long a process might take, and whom a person can contact if they have questions.

3. **Quick, honest and human responses in times of large crises or emergencies**
   Give government a face people can relate to, especially in those public moments where tensions and stress are running high. This can be as direct as posting live updates to social media as events unfold, as the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection does throughout the year on its Twitter account @Cal_Fire.

4. **Community data**
   Build community calendars with details on local events and activities open to the public. Information is itself a service, and agencies have opportunities to build trust by being that connector between what citizens are looking for and what other groups in the community are offering, including private sector and non-profits.

Once people begin engaging, government should keep the conversation going when possible. People are more willing to engage if their feedback receives timely responses or if they feel like they're having an actual dialog with the agency. Public responses, such as those on social media, also show more hesitant citizens that their potential feedback won't be ignored.

Even if people don't respond or engage right away, government still sees gains in productivity by following this goal. When digital services make things harder, costs increase for support, call centers, duplicate processes and other obstacles. The private sector has already discovered that it's not enough to invest in IT and new business processes. To take full advantage of productivity gains, you also need to make things easy for your end users.

Conclusion

When it comes to big picture items — clean air, safety standards for food, distributing social security, waste management — agencies do an excellent job of getting complicated jobs done efficiently. But it's easy to take the big picture for granted when you run up against obstacles in your daily life. Personal opinions are formed from the accumulation of those experiences in day-to-day routines. Eventually, enough experiences will harden into a positive or negative perception.

Government agencies can't break people into demographic groups, the way the private sector can. They are tasked with serving everyone, no matter how many diverse needs that may cover. Where services fall short, agencies run the risk of losing public trust , but digital services offer new ways to win people over while remaining productive and cost-efficient. By focusing on these as a means to build trust, government can give people personalized interactions and reduce the frustration or anxiety with which they regard government services.

What's Next?

Liferay Digital Experience Platform is a secure open source solution used by government agencies throughout the US. Learn more at liferay.com/government

See how the Illinois Student Assistance Commission used Liferay to re-engineer its portal so that it could easily manage financial aid processes and better serve Illinois students. Visit liferay.com/ISAC

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Liferay makes software that helps companies create digital experiences on web, mobile and connected devices. Our platform is open source, which makes it more reliable, innovative and secure. We try to leave a positive mark on the world through business and technology. Hundreds of organizations in financial services, healthcare, government, insurance, retail, manufacturing and multiple other industries use Liferay. Visit us at liferay.com.