An opportune time to
modernize CX

Government leaders are capitalizing on the lessons they learned during the pandemic to improve the digital experience for citizens, employees and partners

THE IMPORTANCE OF IMPROVING the customer experience (CX) at agencies was widely acknowledged before COVID-19 struck. But the pandemic made clear just how much constituents rely on government services. Whether seeking health information, unemployment benefits or the ability to conduct routine transactions while government offices were closed, people turned in droves to websites, contact centers and other digital resources — often overwhelming agencies that were technologically unprepared for such an influx.

Many of them struggled to adapt to new demands for services and fell short of meeting customer expectations — particularly for self-service options, easy access to information and a user experience that is streamlined and intuitive. In short, the crisis reinforced the vital role that digital services play in ensuring the health and well-being of our country and the continuity of business and daily life.

According to research firm Gartner, "digital maturity in government remains low," with about 80% of organizations in the initial and developing stages. In another study, Gartner researchers noted that digital transformation "is exceptionally difficult to achieve in government," and although 67% of government organizations report that they are pursuing transformation, only 5% are achieving it.

"Local, state and federal government agencies are often either still running on analog processes or desperately trying to retrofit technologies to their purposes with limited success," wrote Anil Cheriyan in a May 2020 article for The Enterprisers Project. He was director of the General Services Administration's Technology Transformation Services at the time. Cheriyan named six key elements of digital transformation: omnichannel experience, artificial intelligence, infrastructure optimization and cloud, accelerators, data and analytics, and identity management.

The federal government sharpened its focus on efforts to digitally transform CX beginning in 2018, when enhancing CX became a cross-agency priority goal and the 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act (IDEA) was signed into law. That's also the year that 100% of public-sector respondents to an IDC survey said digitally transforming their organizations was a top priority.

The 21st Century IDEA requires executive branch agencies to modernize their websites, digitize services and forms, accelerate the use of e-signatures and generally improve CX. It defines website modernization as ensuring that webpages are user-centered, consistent in appearance, searchable, mobile-friendly and accessible to people with disabilities. To ensure that agencies comply with the act, they are required to report on their progress.
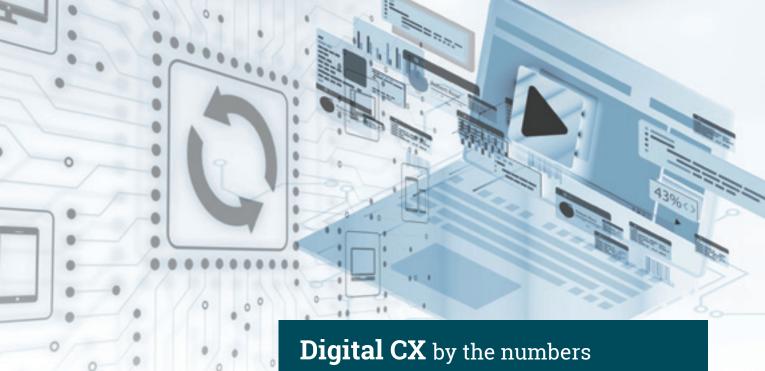
In a recent FCW survey, 70% of respondents said their agencies were digitizing services and forms in accordance with the 21st Century IDEA, while 61% were modernizing websites, 49% were implementing e-signatures and 34% were personalizing content.

A priority at all levels of government

In a report on its progress in implementing the 21st Century IDEA, the Department of Health and Human Services said its Centers for Disease Control and Prevention turned to user-centric, digital-first design principles to handle the spike in demand for online resources during the pandemic. In addition, HHS' Office of the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs relied on user feedback to improve communication via HHS.gov and social media, and coordinated digital communications teams across HHS to ensure that the department's COVID-19 information met the public's needs.

The Defense Department reported that it has prioritized improvements to websites that lack appropriate levels of accessibility and is updating its Forms Management Program to align with the 21st Century IDEA's requirements. GSA established a new Digital Council to collaborate with the Digital Governance Senior Steering Committee on enterprise-wide efforts to modernize websites. In addition, an internal community of GSA site managers is focusing on improving communications and clarifying expectations related to the 21st Century IDEA.

Modernizing behind-the-scenes functions is a crucial aspect of digital transformation and CX. For instance, the Small Business Administration's Loan Review Tool uses self-guided workflows and intelligent process automation to reduce the amount of time employees spend on post-origination reviews by 30%, saving thousands of hours of work annually while boosting SBA's ability to ensure compliance with eligibility and underwriting criteria. Similarly, a recent report by the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation notes the turmoil experienced by the U.S. Postal Service during the pandemic and encourages Congress to fund research into the use of robots to sort and even deliver mail to save money and increase efficiency

— something the USPS Office of Inspector General recommended in a 2018 report.

Enhancing digital capabilities is also a primary focus at the state and local levels. For state CIOs, "improving and digitizing CX" is a key element of the second of 10 priorities related to strategies, policy issues and management processes in 2021, according to the National Association of State CIOs.

Such concerns are not surprising given the fact that state and local governments have been on the frontlines of helping people deal with challenges related to jobs and education during the pandemic, including filing for unemployment benefits, adjusting to telework and pivoting to remote learning for students.

Last year, Rhode Island partnered with Google Cloud to create a Virtual Career Center to connect residents to potential new career paths and training opportunities with the help of an artificial intelligence-powered chatbot. And a public/private partnership is supporting Tucson, Ariz., on its smart-city strategy and its efforts to connect more than 32,000 of the city's 212,000 households to broadband internet — a necessity for teleworkers and students.

Gleaning lessons for future policymaking

In fact, taking steps to narrow the digital divide was one of the lessons cited in a December 2020 report by the Partnership for Public Service and Microsoft. In "Bit By Bit: How

Digital CX by the numbers

95%
Local governments that used software to maintain service delivery during the pandemic

38%
FCW survey respondents who said their agencies found new and innovative ways to serve customers during the pandemic

89%
FCW respondents who said their agencies are improving employee engagement as part of their efforts to improve CX

573,021
Queries on Search.gov related to unemployment benefits in 2020, an increase of nearly 400% over the previous year

Sources: FCW, General Services Administration, Partnership for Public Service

Governments Used Technology to Move the Mission Forward During COVID-19," they examined how three agencies responded to the crisis and gleaned lessons that could be applied to technology policy and management in government.

The lessons also included the importance of building a technology foundation, putting users first when designing technology solutions and rethinking mission delivery through technology, especially now that so many government employees have embraced telework and the tools that make it possible for them to deliver services from any location.

"Governments can take advantage of changed attitudes to alter their approach to technology for operations and service delivery," the report states. "Technology could allow agencies to reach a larger number of people, provide more seamless services and reduce the burden on employees providing those services."

Fortunately, 89% of respondents to FCW's

survey said their agencies are focused on improving employee engagement as part of their efforts to improve the customer experience.

The common thread running through all those lessons is the need for agencies to enhance their understanding of customers so they can make better decisions about delivering services and providing important information. Agencies must also be able to build digital services quickly without compromising quality or security. And because engaged employees are essential to the delivery of government services, agencies must make sure employees have the technology and support they need to do their jobs.

The requirements of the 21st Century IDEA set the stage for agencies to meet and even exceed those goals. The pandemic demonstrated that providing a robust, digital experience for all customers is not optional — it's essential. ■