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FCW

Digitally Transforming the Customer Experience

The pandemic forced agencies to boost their ability to deliver services anytime, anywhere. The challenge now is using that momentum to spark a revolution in digital government.

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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. ■



Customer experience is a team sport

Opportunity: A new vision and strategy for improving CX

THE PANDEMIC ACCELERATED the move to digital services for agencies at all levels of government. Many agencies made improvements in a matter of months that they previously expected to take years and were able to shift their employees to remote work quickly.

Meanwhile, Americans now conduct banking transactions online, order groceries to be delivered or picked up curbside, attend telehealth appointments, and stream everything from exercise classes to the latest hit TV shows.

These types of everyday experiences further drive government services to all be easily accessible, seamless and available 24/7 from anywhere on any device.

Touchpoints: Moments that matter

CX encompasses all of the touchpoints that a customer has with an agency. Improving the digital experience involves ensuring that citizens, businesses and employees can all solve their problems efficiently at each touchpoint.

Many requests for government services start with a form, which can be a frustrating touchpoint. That's why improving forms is an essential component of the 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act. Americans can save time and avoid frustration when they easily enter data into a mobile-friendly digital form on any device, sign it electronically and submit it securely. Digital forms



Jonathan Benett

Technical Director, Government Solutions, Adobe

also save time and effort for government employees, and they limit the opportunity for data entry errors, which further strain government resources and lead to an unsatisfactory experience for employees and citizens.

Improving CX is becoming a top priority for many government agencies. Rallying the organization behind the goals and enabling employees at each touchpoint in the customer's journey can lead to positive outcomes that everyone can be proud of. Helping everyone understand who their customers are, the major tasks they want to complete and the pain points in each customer journey is critical to any CX strategy.

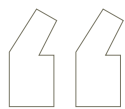
It can be helpful to have an agency senior leader, such as a chief customer officer, oversee all of the CX initiatives and bring the customer perspective to all conversations to drive the strategy agency-wide.

Impact: Committed to progress

The employee and customer experiences are mutually beneficial. Employees who deliver outstanding experiences to their customers take pride in the work they do. Communication and collaboration are essential. Articulating how employee effort and contributions impact the mission and delivery of the CX strategy is important. Doing this well will give employees a sense of purpose and a strong connection to agency goals.

A great experience is defined by the customer. Great experience design is





Improving the digital experience involves ensuring that **citizens, businesses and employees can all solve their problems efficiently at each touchpoint.**



centered on thorough user experience research and a well-aligned team to execute. As government agencies are learning how and where to best apply this, we are seeing great progress that should be celebrated and replicated.

As government CX maturity grows, more standards, guidance and transparency can help federal agencies share what's working and lessons learned and evaluate their progress and success.

The Office of Management and Budget just reinstated previous guidance (Part 6 of OMB Circular A-11) directing federal agencies to develop goals and track progress regarding CX and the delivery of government services.

Based on more than a decade of public service leading IT transformation and service delivery projects, I'm a strong CX advocate and believe it's important to establish clear targets for performance

improvements and the ability to measure them. OMB's framework emphasizes data-driven goal setting, consistent reviews of progress and reporting of results.

Agencies focused on building CX capabilities to improve experiences can achieve higher levels of service, consistency and renewed public trust. ■

Jonathan Benett is technical director for government solutions at Adobe.



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Optimizing the user experience at the edge

Customers and employees can benefit from the performance and security boost provided by edge computing



Micah Maryn

Senior Solutions Engineer, Akamai Technologies

PERFORMANCE IS PARAMOUNT. When a user has a bad experience with a government website, resolving those issues via phone calls or other means is costly. But the hidden costs are even larger. There's a direct correlation between user experience and trust: Bad performance chips away at user/citizen trust. Retailers have known this for a long time, hence their obsession with streamlining the customer experience.

The 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act (IDEA) seeks to do the same thing, in part by promoting the use of mobile apps. According to the Pew Research Center, about 20% of Americans are smartphone-dependent, meaning their only connection to the internet is via a smartphone. Those people are often in the lowest income groups and particularly in need of access to government programs, especially during the pandemic.

When agencies make government resources available on mobile devices, they enable citizens to service their own needs in an on-demand format, without calling a contact center or visiting a local government office. The results are increased efficiency and enhanced customer satisfaction.

Modernization and security go hand in hand

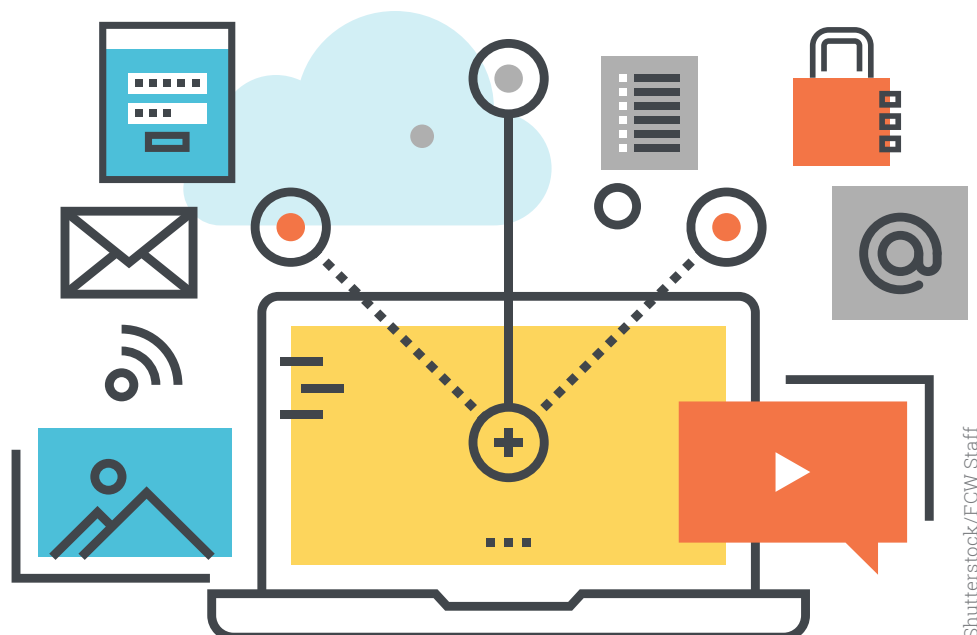
Modernization efforts lead to improved security. Legacy systems are becoming increasingly harder to secure, particularly if they're on

physical infrastructure. The 21st Century IDEA advocates using a flexible cloud infrastructure to make it easier to improve the user experience on any device while enhancing security.

As agencies seek to offer better digital services, many of them turn to responsive design engines to send websites to mobile devices. However, the time it takes for those engines to analyze and assemble a unique response to specific devices slows down the user experience, leaving citizens frustrated and unable to complete necessary tasks. What if the distance between the user and the data could be lessened? Enter the Akamai Edge.

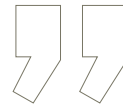
Akamai executes business logic and security policies at the edge to improve performance without compromising security. We can also put capacity rules in place at the edge to distribute the load and keep a distributed denial-of-service attack or sudden rise in traffic from affecting a website's performance.

For example, Akamai is helping state and local agencies push optimization and security out to the edge for vaccine registration websites. We are also incorporating dynamic waiting rooms so users don't lose their session if the application is at capacity. As soon as a concurrent connection to the application is available, the user is allowed in.





When agencies make government resources available on mobile devices, **they enable citizens to service their own needs in an on-demand format.**



Better protection and performance for remote workers

Edge computing also has implications for telework. Many of the government's concerns about security, infrastructure and productivity have been alleviated by the success of work-from-home programs during the pandemic. However, the reliance on virtual private networks is not scalable and presents significant risk. If successful, hackers could

compromise government-furnished equipment and have access to the entire network.

Secure access service edge (SASE) technology allows agencies to use device profiling to verify that users are logging on from a government-approved device, blocking hackers from using stolen credentials and flagging any anomalies in behavior. A SASE-based “verify then trust” approach also improves

performance for remote workers.

There are many ways to provide an excellent digital experience for users, whether they are citizens or employees. Agencies need to determine the right approach for their particular needs and find the right partner to help them achieve their goals. ■

Micah Maryn is senior solutions engineer at Akamai Technologies.



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Amplifying the power of the customer's voice

The pandemic has revealed that modernizing CX is not about technology but about a change in mindset



Patrick Moore

Vice President for Business Development,
Granicus

AMERICANS' EXPECTATIONS FOR

government have changed. Mobile bank deposits, online food orders and everything delivered from Amazon have all shifted our view of how services should work. Government has been moving (albeit slowly) in the direction of digital services and improved customer experiences, but the pandemic demonstrated something that we knew all along: Technology works, and government can move fast to implement it.

When government agencies went remote, offices stayed open virtually and services (mostly) remained available. And while those areas where government needs more digitalization (such as unemployment systems) were made even more apparent, the trains kept moving. So what is next?

Government can respond by doing something it has done more of in recent years — listen. As the power of the customer's voice reaches government, agencies that are savvy listeners and can integrate customer feedback into their service improvement plans will set the leadership tone for a responsive and digital government.

Lawmakers are embracing the need

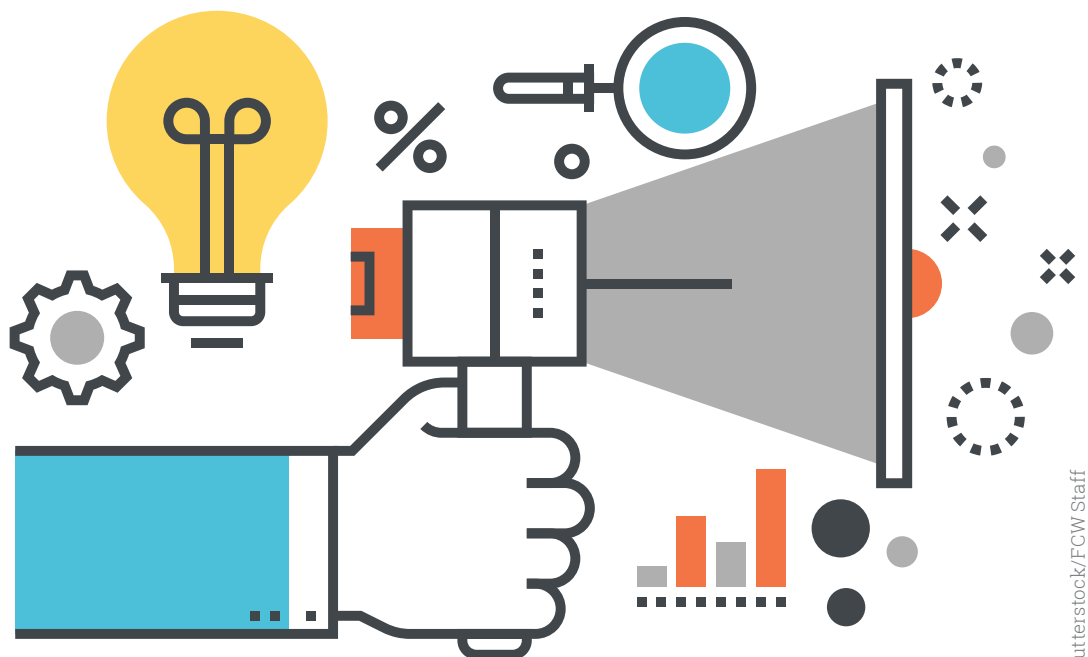
for digital government. The central components of the 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act — modernizing websites, digitizing services and forms, accelerating the use of e-signatures, improving the customer experience, and transitioning to shared services — apply to all levels of government. Agencies understand the value of those changes, and the experience of the pandemic has given them even more incentive to make those changes.

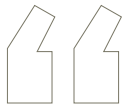
Yes, websites still matter!

Websites play a crucial role in the

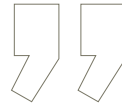
customer experience. The technology that supports website development continues to improve, but the focus on how customers engage with and through a website is now a more compelling design element than the underlying technology.

By working backward from what type of information customers are looking for, their needs and their expectations, agencies can begin to improve the way they communicate with these individuals. For example, agencies at all levels of government face challenges related to vaccine distribution. It can be difficult for members of the public to sift through all the noise to find accurate





Technology is embedded in all aspects of an organization's operations. More important, it is embedded in the experiences we have as customers and employees.



information so that they know what to do. Answering empathetic questions about an audience's needs and pain points (who they are and how they want to hear from you) and then aligning technology to reach and engage more people will help agencies achieve those goals.

An evolving leadership role for CIOs

The role of the CIO and the CIO's

organization has become more strategic, and many CIOs report directly to the top executive at their agencies. Technology is embedded in all aspects of an organization's operations. More important, it is embedded in the experiences we have as customers and employees.

Accordingly, the CIO role is gradually becoming less focused on bits and bytes and blinking lights, and more so on the experience of the individual who is

receiving a service.

Those agencies that treat CIOs as strategic partners and involve them in decision-making will be the most successful at finding new ways to engage with customers and improve processes across the organization. ■

Patrick Moore is vice president for business development at Granicus and former CIO for the state of Georgia.



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How to build a more **user-focused website**

With the right platform, agencies can easily comply with mandates for modernizing internal and external websites

THE PANDEMIC HAS amplified the need to improve agencies' ability to interact digitally with citizens and other constituents. It has also magnified the importance of the 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act's (IDEA) goals of creating secure, searchable websites with a consistent look and feel. Underlying all of this is the demand for analytics that can drive evidence-based improvements in the customer experience.

Site improvement efforts begin with understanding what people are trying to accomplish when they interact with a government resource online. Gathering information about those interactions can help agencies determine if users are accomplishing their objectives. If users are

not successful, the data can help agencies identify what they need to change for creating a better digital experience. And, of course, it's vitally important that all online interactions happen in a way that is secure and trustworthy.

A personalized, self-service experience

After the 21st Century IDEA was signed into law, the General Services Administration's Technology Transformation Services published the U.S. Web Design System. This offers guidance and technology that agencies can use to create websites that are IDEA-compliant.

Liferay applied the principles of the U.S. Web Design System to our platform



Kale Fluharty

Director of Federal,
Liferay

to further streamline agencies' ability to create websites that achieve the goals of the act. Liferay is particularly focused on facilitating action-oriented, self-service interactions. Our analytics component allows agencies to create audience segments so they can personalize the experience of website visitors based on why they use the site and what's important to them.

We also offer a more robust cloud-based analytics offering and the ability to test different versions of content to find the best way to reach the target audience. With Liferay, agencies can meet IDEA's searchability requirement with a best-in-class capability right out of the box.

Shifting the focus away from back-end systems

At its most fundamental, the Liferay platform is open-source and has all the security and stability advantages of open-source software. With a robust community reviewing Liferay's source code, vulnerabilities are quickly identified and fixed. For our enterprise product, we harden that open-source offering through rigorous security, vulnerability and cyber-hack testing.

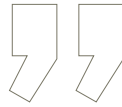
Furthermore, agencies can deploy the Liferay platform wherever they choose, including in a government data center when data must stay local or in their preferred cloud service provider environment.

Liferay helps agencies achieve the 21st Century IDEA's goals for both external- and internal-facing websites. For example, when the team behind Grants.gov decided





By ensuring that digital interactions and websites are not encumbered by legacy systems or back-end processes, **agencies can keep citizen and employee interactions relatively simple and straightforward.**



to modernize its website, it chose Liferay as a secure, affordable platform that would allow it to create customized solutions and add third-party plug-ins. A redesigned search capability makes it easier for people to find relevant funding opportunities, and microsites and communities of interest, and enables collaboration among colleagues throughout the grant application process.

The MyNavy Portal is a great example

of an internal, employee-facing Liferay use case. The Navy moved several systems and databases to a single solution on the Liferay platform. The resulting portal helps sailors manage their military careers by consolidating human resources and education and training information via a personalized interface. As a result, the Navy was well positioned to handle the shift to remote work when government offices closed their doors during the pandemic.

By ensuring that digital interactions and websites are not encumbered by legacy systems or back-end processes, agencies can keep citizen and employee interactions relatively simple and straightforward. As a result, they can shift the focus to the user experience and what users want to accomplish. ■

Kale Fluharty is the director of federal at Liferay.

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Government unifies the citizen experience, goes digital

Customer-centric thinking is not new, but the pandemic has given government agencies a newfound impetus to act



Thomas Saracene

Senior Director of Digital Transformation,
Global Public Sector, Salesforce

DURING THE PANDEMIC, out of necessity, everyone has been interacting digitally more than ever before. And we're relying more heavily on government services than we have since the Great Depression. Those interactions tend to involve the most important aspects of our lives, such as housing, health care and financial stability.

At the same time, the volume of those demands and the mechanisms for responding to them are changing, which is forcing government agencies to find ways to be more effective and efficient.

If we have the ability to sell luxury items through targeted, tailored and emotion-driven customer engagements, then we should be able to help families keep a roof over their heads and put food on the table with the same level of empathy and personalization.

We need scalable solutions, and we need to eliminate silos and redundancies across government services. We now have proven systems and data to support that effort. The question is: Can government agencies handle the organizational changes and how quickly can they act?

Informed by data and designed around the customer

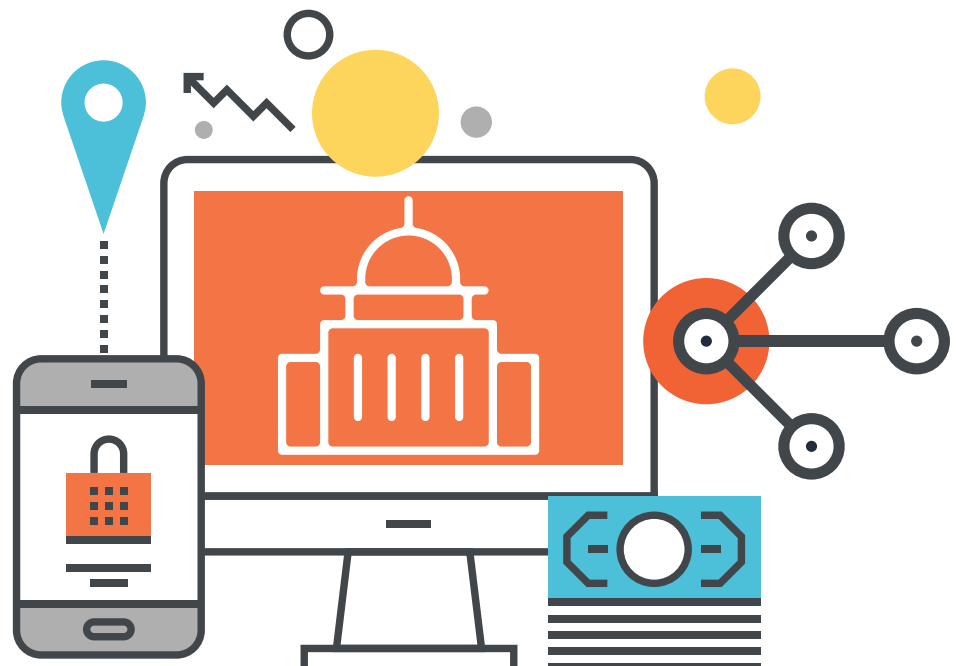
To achieve that transformation, government must begin by pivoting to a customer-centric approach to

all activities within and across agencies. Digital engagement should be informed by data and designed around the customer, not around internal processes. Shifting to an outward, customer-centric view requires retooling at the system, data and organizational levels.

That shift involves assembling a holistic picture of the customer so that services are delivered in context. Data is essential at every stage of the process and should be used to validate the customer's needs and next steps. Data can also be used to guide customers through the life cycle of their interactions and allow agencies to hand off a customer from one program to another one or even to another agency.

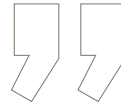
Agencies should start thinking about creating a unified engagement layer that can house everything they know about a customer and that customer's journey over time to ensure a positive, productive experience. That engagement layer also makes it possible for agencies to modernize back-office activities and seamlessly improve the customer experience.

Thanks to the 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act, government agencies have been modernizing websites and digitizing forms. But those websites and forms are still disconnected from the data and still fail to address the customer life cycle. Furthermore, agencies must





Digital engagement should be informed by data and designed around the customer,
not around internal processes.



also embrace the other elements of the act, including adopting e-signatures, improving the customer experience and moving to shared services.

A single front door for customer interactions

Citizens, businesses and other government partners need a single front door – a place where they can engage regardless of where they are in their particular interaction.

That front door service should include everything they have done and everything they could do regardless of which agency, office, department or person is handling the interaction on the government side.

Many agencies are linking internal programs that are sequential or dependent on one another and building processes around those programs to unify the customer experience. That's an important step in moving toward agency-wide

engagement. However, the ultimate goal is government-wide engagement.

It will take time to evolve, and clearly we can't do all of this overnight. The best strategy is to start small within a program or agency and then build outward from there. ■

Thomas Saracene is senior director of digital transformation in the Global Public Sector at Salesforce.

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James Ward

Vice President, Regulated Industries,
Talkdesk

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC resulted in a surge in calls from citizens with questions related to unemployment, shifting tax deadlines and stimulus checks. For some state agencies, incoming queries grew as high as 100,000 calls per hour. Many struggled to rapidly scale contact center operations and had difficulty adapting websites or call-routing logic to proactively provide information to citizens. Those challenges were compounded by the need to quickly move employees to remote work.

Digitally transforming the contact center would enable agencies to leverage technology for speed and efficiency. Imagine a scenario in which a person can call the local unemployment office and talk to a “virtual agent” (or voice bot) to receive an update on their unemployment benefits, identify gaps in submissions or self-report required activity. Not only does this create a better citizen experience, it also deflects the call from a live agent, reducing strain on the contact center and allowing agents to focus on more complicated citizen requests.

At Talkdesk, our goal is to automate 80% of customer interactions in the next three years. This means 80% of interactions will either be fully automated or conducted via an automated process that improves agent efficiency.

Adapting to a changing security landscape

The ability to scale up to handle a sudden workload influx while enabling work

location flexibility will continue to be a concern. Moving systems and processes into the cloud is a foundational step on the road to digital transformation, and new deployment methods enable agencies to keep existing call-routing structures while adding cloud capabilities.

Regardless of where they work, agents can be the most vulnerable security concern, with social engineering plays designed specifically to target government agencies. Artificial intelligence-based solutions can apply machine learning to help determine whether a caller is using social engineering tactics to manipulate individuals into divulging confidential or personal information.

Agencies should also consider emerging

solutions that are inherently designed to meet the security challenges faced in the contact center. For example, Talkdesk Guardian™ enables agent activity to be monitored no matter where agents are located in order to surface fraud attempts, data leakages, privacy-related breaches and identity theft by using machine learning to identify suspicious activity outside established data patterns.

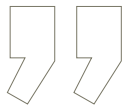
A proactive approach to customer satisfaction

Measuring customer journey and satisfaction is essential to improving the customer experience, and success hinges on capturing and analyzing data. Fully automated interaction scoring can





The ability to scale up to handle a sudden workload influx while enabling work location flexibility will continue to be a concern.



augment or completely replace manual processes and be used to evaluate customer intent and sentiment. Post-interaction surveys can solicit feedback in the moment to assess customer satisfaction or capture the voice of the customer. These capabilities enhance the subset of tools an agency can leverage for enabling human-centered design and CX improvement.

By applying speech analytics in the contact center, agencies can aggregate

disparate data points across customer interactions and surveys; parse large volumes of data around key interaction moments, topics, audience and sentiment; and then convert that unstructured data into searchable reports and data visualizations. These real-time dashboards enable analysis on various attributes of CX, surface trends on strengths and weaknesses regarding automation strategy, and provide actionable insights on what

and where to improve, as well as areas to proactively resolve potential issues before they occur.

The results are higher agent productivity, increased insights into CX and lower IT costs. This is the next step in enabling agencies to improve the experience for agents and customers. ■

James Ward is vice president of regulated industries at Talkdesk.

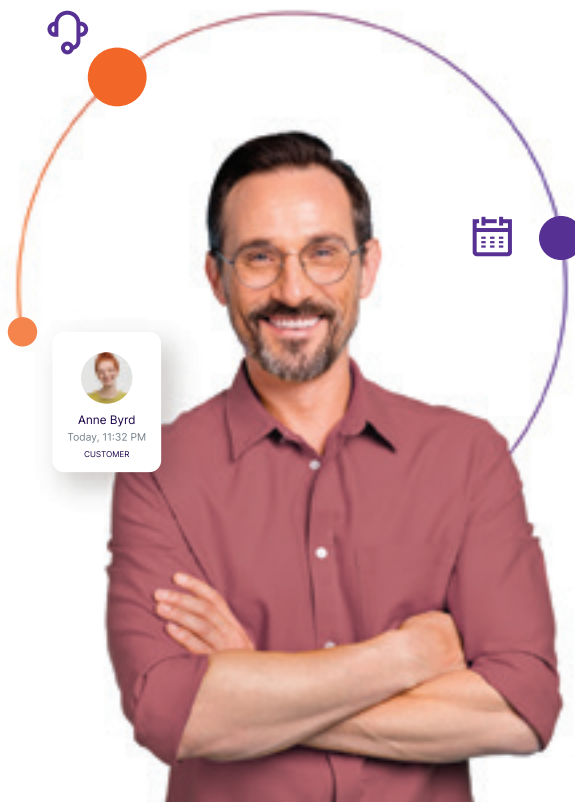
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Q&A Executive Viewpoint

A conversation with **JACK GALVIN**



JACK GALVIN

Associate Deputy Assistant Secretary, Office of Information and Technology, IT Operations and Services, Department of Veterans Affairs

A technology leader talks about what the pandemic taught the VA about telehealth, telework and the ability to innovate quickly

How did the VA expand access to telehealth during the pandemic, and how did that affect the delivery of medical care to veterans?

Pre-pandemic, we had a pretty robust telehealth program and the technology to support it. We were handling about 2,400 or so video connections between providers and veterans on any given day. But during the pandemic, that increased by about 1,700%. Now we have around 40,000 clinical video encounters a day.

Obviously, one of the first things we had to do was expand our capacity. We did that with our existing solution, and we also introduced a scalable option in the cloud. It's very quick to expand if we need to, and it certainly helped us stay ahead of the unprecedented demand that we experienced.

Telehealth helped us maintain that continuity of care and connection between our veterans and our providers. Some 3.8 million video encounters were performed during fiscal year 2020. All that interaction allowed veterans, as well as providers who couldn't travel in, to respect social distancing protocols while at the same time allowing us to maintain our mission to provide care to our veterans.

We've also worked on delivering other functionality that veterans need. For

example, we had some really wonderful products delivered very, very quickly by our digital services team — things like support for COVID-19 vaccination scheduling. We also have an app called "I am Here" so that a veteran arriving for an appointment can send a message from the parking lot that "I'm here" and start the check-in process while maintaining social distancing.

Those kinds of applications were readily adapted and made available through DevSecOps or agile delivery. It's another area of modernization where we're not only modernizing the technology but the way we deliver it.

What role does the Electronic Health Record Modernization program play in the VA's efforts to improve service delivery?

From the time people are inducted into active duty in the military to their final honor and burial, they would have one electronic medical record instead of multiple instances. With multiple instances, you've got a continuity issue. You've got to find the records, you've got to assemble them, and you've got to repeat some medical care because you don't have access to everything.

The EHR program allows us to have continuous records throughout the lifespan

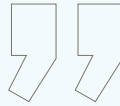


We really need to make IT an enabler so that we're able to quickly say, 'Yes, we can do that.'





Telehealth helped us maintain that continuity of care and connection between our veterans and our providers.



of a military and then a veteran service person. Providers have access to all the pertinent information they need to provide care. Veterans don't have to scramble with paper retrieval or deal with gaps in records from many different sources.

From an IT perspective, it simplifies our ability to support and sustain a single standard solution, and it helps us facilitate innovation. We can deploy a solution one time and basically replicate it across the environment rather than having to check all the variations in a hundred or so databases to ensure that the change works.

It will also allow seamless interaction and interoperability between the VA and the Defense Department, so it's quite a substantial game changer for us.

How did the VA support an increase in telework during the pandemic while ensuring that employees remained productive and engaged?

Before COVID-19, we had a pretty large implementation of telework, somewhere between 40,000 and 50,000 daily participants, but obviously that increased enormously with the pandemic. Now we support upwards of 100,000 to 120,000 on a daily basis. As with telehealth, we expanded what we had and introduced scalable options in the cloud as well.

We also looked at alternatives like being able to allow secure access when employees are using their own devices. We've introduced some solutions and augmented the ones we already had to allow that. However, we did acquire over 200,000 laptops so that we would be ready to outfit those who needed one to connect remotely.

As it pertains to productivity and engagement, we went all in on collaborative tools like Microsoft Teams and Cisco Webex. It's hard to imagine a world in which you wouldn't use those tools today, but I can tell you that a year ago, they were foreign to us. They were there, but we used them sporadically.

I think we were one of the largest single implementations of Teams, with almost 500,000 desktops. People have really taken to it, much like they've taken to telework and telehealth.

What are the VA's long-term plans for incorporating telehealth and telework into daily operations?

We do not expect to return to pre-pandemic levels on either front. Telehealth in particular has become an adopted framework and an acceptable practice that has been well received by our veteran community and our provider teams. Telework certainly has become a natural and productive means to participate without necessarily being physically present somewhere. Much of what we do with various teams across the country is virtual anyway.

What we want to focus on now is enhancing the experience, with options like allowing employees to use their own devices and familiar interfaces but they're only a few clicks away from making a secure connection.

In terms of telehealth, the Veterans Health Administration is looking into options such as setting up a virtual waiting room that could deliver specific content to veterans pertaining to their visit or their specific case or even just relaying important information about benefits in general.

We plan to focus on our unified

communications platform so that we can deliver that standard experience. That way, if a veteran calls or texts about needing services and the provider says, "I'd really like to see you," we can pivot quickly to a video session on the same platform. Another area we're exploring is on-demand video so that if a veteran says, "Hey, I really need a video session," we have providers who can quickly connect via video to a veteran in need.

What lessons have you learned that could help other agencies in their efforts to transform the customer experience?

We certainly learned that it's important to have scalable options. And it's very important to be in sync with those you serve, to understand what they need and then have the ability to pivot quickly on the infrastructure side. Nothing stifles innovation quicker than not being able to scale a good idea. And certainly the VA is huge. It's all about scale.

The currency of the day is speed — the speed to deliver new functionality or a new experience to a veteran or to a provider to help them provide care more quickly. We really need to make IT an enabler so that we're able to quickly say, "Yes, we can do that." We're continuously ready, and we're managing our technical debt in such a way that it's never too far from being ready to pivot to any modernization, like an electronic health record.

My advice is to focus on scalable platforms and getting technical debt under control so you're always ready, and to recognize that the purpose of IT is to add value, not for IT's sake but for whatever business you're in. ■