Driving Digital Services

Developing and deploying a portfolio of government agency digital services is as much a cultural shift as a technological shift.

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INSIDE

Create a Digital Services-Oriented Culture

GOVERNMENT LEADERS HAVE KNOWN for some time the manner in which agencies develop and provide services to both their citizens and their business users is broken. Processes are too complicated and take too long. Agency workers often have to re-enter information in different systems because information-sharing among agencies is spotty. And some processes remain manual or only semi-automated.

There are many reasons why government services aren't as effective and efficient as possible. The lack of information-sharing, outdated tools and unreliable systems, monolithic practices and stakeholder-centered design all contribute to the inefficiency.

Things are changing, though, due in large part to the establishment of the U.S. Digital Service, the GSA's 18F digital services agency, and the U.S. Digital Services Playbook, which describes successful practices that can help agencies build effective digital services. All these factors are helping create a culture of change.

The Environmental Protection Agency is working hard to change its technology culture to promote digital services. Last year, CIO Ann Duncan hired Greg Godbout, former executive director of 18F. Together, they're doing what it takes to change the EPA's culture and processes from the typical stakeholder-centered design using waterfall methodologies and monolithic practices to one more focused on user-centered design, modular practices, agile methodologies and open innovation.

Duncan emphasizes that creating a digital services culture requires a completely different thought and decision-making process. For example, the traditional waterfall method used for developing services requires developers to determine what they think they want in a system, often without much user input. When the system is ready, it's not uncommon for a customer to reject it because it's not what they needed.

A more effective approach uses real evidence and user input to develop services. It also takes small steps instead of huge leaps by conducting short discovery "sprints" to ensure they're on the right track. That way, instead of spending millions up front for a product that may not meet users' needs, agencies can spend a fraction to ensure they're meeting user needs and requirements before proceeding.

To encourage different parts of the agency to move toward a digital services culture, the EPA offers several services to its employees. For example, it provides its developers with knowledgeable partners from the Presidential Innovation Fellow program, which pairs technologists with government employees to drive innovation.

The EPA also offers a procurement service. This helps development teams write short Statements of Work for discovery sprints as an alternative to large procurements. There are other programs underway to encourage the agency to embrace user experience designers and design thinking in general.

"These are all coaching in disguise," says Godbout. "This is a new craft, and we can't just write a policy or do training. You need someone who is practiced working this way."

CHANGE IS UNDERWAY AT EPA

Although moving toward user-centered designs, discovery sprints and agile methodologies is a significant culture change, it's already paying off at EPA. The agency's Office of Water, for example, piloted a project that paired a User Experience (UX) designer with a developer and a team to foster a more regimented, disciplined, agile, user-centered process.

By the end of the two month project, IT leaders at the Office of Water were so convinced the new processes worked; it now has 12 projects running with the new methodology. The Office of Water has also begun to replicate EPA's digital service offerings to its own internal development teams.

While not all EPA departments and offices are as far along as the Office of Water, Godbout says it's a matter of time. "We find that after the first successful experience, they become very excited. In some cases it takes more time, but they come around in most cases."

Streamlining government processes also helps encourage the digital services culture, says Duncan. She points to how the EPA has flattened its organization in a way that empowers people to make decisions more reflective of the users. The EPA has also restructured its governance process by replacing multiple governance boards with one, which now make all decisions with user input. Finally, the agency is modifying policies and procedures to address agile delivery and to empower programs to improve. ❈

Leverage Technology to Improve Citizen Engagement and Services

THE PUSH THROUGHOUT federal government to improve citizen engagement and services is front and center in every agency. A recent survey from GovDelivery proves that point loud and clear. The survey found 82 percent of public sector respondents consider improving the citizen experience with government as a top priority in 2016.

The Federal government is providing the tools for agencies to make it happen through organizations like the Digital Government Service and 18F. Individual agencies are in various stages of developing their own internal citizen services expertise.

Gwynne Kostin, Senior Advisor for the Partnership for Public Service and Director of GSA's Digital Government and Digital Services Innovation Center, says effectively making these changes requires several steps. These include expanding the traditional idea of time and history, investing time in defining the problem, and learning and observing as much as possible before taking action.

Expanding the way we think about time and history means realizing the Internet of today is not the Internet of 20 years ago. Therefore, government processes of today must be much different from those in the past. "The idea that the way we're doing things now has to be the way things are done isn't true," she says. "It's an interrupter to innovation."

Making changes that stick requires investing time in truly understanding and defining the problem, says Kostin. If an agency decides to solve for X, but the problem isn't X, you end up solving for the wrong problem. "When we look at a long wait [for a service], is that really the problem? It could be process," she says. "If we have a faster bad process, it's still a bad process."

LISTEN, LEARN AND OBSERVE

The key to determining the real problem is listening, learning and observing. Without paying attention, it's too easy to misunderstand the real problem, says Kostin.

Lisa Wolfisch, Deputy Director for the Center for New Media and Promotion at the U.S. Census Bureau, knows this firsthand. The Census Bureau conducts more than 100 continuous surveys each year through a variety of channels—by phone, online, mail and through interviews. It also solicits feedback through satisfaction surveys, webinars, social media and call centers.

Part of planning the Bureau's digital transformation was ensuring it was measuring the feedback that needed to be measured, measuring it the right way, and recording it in a meaningful way. "We want to make sure the information was repeatable, significant and that we had the right information," she says. "Technology isn't always the problem—it's how we listen to our customers."

Through that work, Wolfisch's office came up with a mantra it actually posted at the office: Customizable, Downloadable, Embeddable, Shareable. "These are things we want to achieve based on initial research, feedback and user information," she says.

Listening effectively helps agencies identify their key metrics, which is critical to a successful digital transformation. Dan Katz,

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technical director for the public sector at Acquia, agrees focusing on the user experience to identify key metrics is critical. Acquia is currently working with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms to improve its digital services. The first step is identifying features and services important to users, such as finding the right office and being able to renew dealer licenses online.

Katz emphasizes the importance of using API-centric open platforms to achieve digital transformation. With open platforms such as Drupal, he says, agencies can more easily share content, eliminate content duplication and facilitate better collaboration between different government offices. ❈

Creativity and Innovation: The Key to Transforming Government

TRANSFORMING GOVERNMENT agency services into automated, easy-to-use services for the American public is a worthy goal. It takes more than simply digitizing processes, though. It's about trying new approaches, experimenting with technologies and processes, and generally thinking outside the box.

"We're not out to transform services just to have new services. We're really out to transform people's lives," says Aaron Snow, executive director of 18F, a fee-for-service government consultancy that helps other government agencies transform how they build, buy and share digital services. "And to transform the services that improve people's lives, we have to transform some entrenched practices."

The key to true transformation, says Snow, is being willing to take the road not often taken. Agencies must be willing to take risks and try new things while adhering to the principles of

"Cultural change happens when we both trust in the methodologies that work." — *Aaron Snow, executive director of 18F*

user-first, agile development, open systems, DevOps and an API-oriented architecture.

Major transformations happen a little at a time. "When one person steps up and says 'I think that we should do this differently,' and that emboldens another and another," he says. "Each group creates the cultural acceptance and momentum for the next group until the new thing is now the thing you can't live without. That's transformation."

THINK DIFFERENTLY

Laying the foundation for a culture of innovation requires thinking differently and being willing to fail, says Maria Roat, Chief Technology Officer at the Department of Transformation (DoT). Roat is spearheading an effort to build two sandboxes, each housed in a different cloud, where innovators can experiment and try hypotheses. As the DoT moves toward digital services, Roat envisions these sandboxes as being safe places to experiment.

The DoT also has an Idea Hub where employees can submit ideas about anything they want or think the department needs. Roat plans to expand the Idea Hub so employees can submit ideas about digital services and then try those ideas in the sandbox.

Sometimes creativity is about being open-minded and willing to take the big chances. That's the route the State Department is taking in revamping the way it engages with people from other countries who want to interact with or do business with the United States.

The first step is learning how to use and incorporate social media tools and platforms. The next step is to combine that technology with challenges regarding language, culture and different perspectives about how to engage with and access content from the State Department.

Because the State Department must connect with so many different types of people in countries around the world, the importance of building local strategies quickly became apparent. "Local engagement was where we would get the biggest bang for the buck," says Lovisa Williams, a Global Digital Strategist with the State Department.

With that part of the process fully underway, Williams' team is working on what she calls "digital diplomacy." This means finding ways to leverage digital technologies to connect people, build relationships and provide a platform to better communicate foreign policy. The ultimate goal, she says, is to develop a larger digital engagement strategy for the entire State Department.

Throughout the Federal government, agencies are finding ways to foster creativity and innovation. This movement is an important part of the cultural shift that must occur to transform government.

"Cultural change happens when we both trust in the 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," says Snow. "That's how we spur adoption and ultimately transformation."

Look Inward with Digital Transformation

WHEN MOST PEOPLE discuss transforming government through digital services, they're referring to revamping citizen-facing services. The idea is to make them simpler, faster and more intuitive. While that's certainly a big part of digital transformation, there are also many important internal processes used by federal employees that could benefit from rethinking and reworking.

At 18F, a federal digital services agency other agencies can hire to help transform services, working on internal digital transformation projects comes with the territory. In its two years of operation, 18F has done many of these projects, from helping GSA's Human Resources department expedite the hiring process and accelerate the process for certifying software is secure enough to go live to helping another agency build an automated task order generator tool.

Mike Kruger, Director of Digital Engagement for the Commerce Department, learned almost by accident the true importance of internal processes and how they can aid digital transformation throughout a department.

Kruger was searching for a way to consolidate multiple e-mail contracts across the department, each with different costs and renewal dates. After researching his options, he found a way to provide the same service to multiple bureaus within the Department under one umbrella. And he could do it in such a way that would let each bureau add additional services as needed.

"One of our goals is stakeholder engagement, outreach and education, and by talking to people and listening, we came up with a much better way," says Kruger. "We can now apply that same process to the next professional service request that comes along."

FULL STEAM AHEAD

The Digital Services department of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) places a high priority on internal projects. Besides transforming important citizen-facing processes like delivering immigration benefits, DHS is working on internal processes that affect its employees' efficiency and effectiveness.

One of its projects is helping an internal team at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) digitize the paper-based immigration application review process conducted by employees. The internal team had already made a lot of the right choices, such as moving to agile development, an open source technical stack and the cloud; but they weren't focused on the customer experience.

"People couldn't understand why we were talking about it. They would say, 'It's only being used by our employees, so why bother? It doesn't need to look pretty,'" says Eric Hysen, Digital Services Executive Director at DHS. "But we stressed the fact that design is about more than making something pretty. It's about making something useful. How you build these internal systems and define internal business processes is just as critical to the service you're delivering to the public."

That's because the way USCIS employees process benefit applications is directly related to the time it takes, the effectiveness and quality of the processing, and how often reviewers have to ask applicants for information they should already have. "When we started digging in, we saw many parts of this digital system were essentially recreating what was found on paper," he says. "This would be setting us up for a situation where we would be recreating some of the same inefficient processes."

Hysen's group is working with the USCIS team to address these issues. They're traveling to USCIS offices across the country where immigration officers actually process applications. "We watched how these officers did their jobs and saw the processes, tools and workarounds they had created in-house," he says. Those observations gave Hysen's team enough data to create a concept for a new design, and the work continues from there.

With successes like these, Hysen advises more agencies to look inward. "Taking the same approach to transforming how we do business inside our agencies is just as important as transforming and improving the services we deliver to the American people."

Digital Transformations in Government: Lessons Learned

FEDERAL AGENCIES ARE diving into digital services projects at a fast pace. They are beginning to understand what works and what doesn't. Here is a summation of five major lessons learned:

Define the problem correctly: "You might decide you need to solve for X, but what if the problem is X cubed, or isn't X at all? If you don't look at your problem definition, you'll be solving for the wrong problem," says Gwynne Kostin, senior advisor for the Partnership for Public Service and Director of GSA's Digital

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> *— Greg Godbout, Chief Technology Officer, EPA*

Government and Digital Services Innovation Center. Kostin advises to keep going up a level, and asking users directly about their problems. "If they say the problem is a long wait, is that really the problem? It could be the process."

Involve everyone in the process: While the digital services team is integral to the process, they can't do it alone. "We found we could come up with proposals that made a lot of sense in the field, but when we brought them back to developers and engineers, they weren't always translated the right way," says Eric Hysen, Digital Services Executive Director at the Department of Homeland Security. Instead, Hysen recommends establishing a process where every developer and project manager goes out into the field to see how people are using the systems they are building. "This gives the development teams valuable context into the work they are doing that they never had before," he says.

Take calculated risks: One essential skill in quality project management is performing a good risk assessment. That's hard to do sometimes, because it forces people out of their comfort zones. "Government does a poor job of risk assessment because it's based on what's comfortable," says Greg Godbout, EPA's Chief Technology Officer. "But if you perform the risk assessment properly and start small, calculated risks can really pay off."

Listen: "Sometimes, the people who come to us don't actually know what they want," says Evagelia Emily Tavoulareas, a founding member of the VA Digital Service. The first step is asking the right question. It's not "What can we build for you?" but "What do you want to accomplish?" And then listen to the answer. "Sometimes what they think they need isn't always the best, most efficient and usable approach," she says, "but by asking more questions and really listening to the answers, you're more likely to get it right."

A prototype is worth 1,000 meetings: Build a prototype slowly in small increments. This proves your point better than any monolithic system. At the Department of Transportation (DoT), a team led by CTO Maria Roat embarked on a project to build the Secretary of the Department a dashboard to monitor events in all divisions of the DoT. The team used an iterative approach, splitting ten weeks into two-week increments, and adding more data sets in each two-week period. It was so successful; the team is now working on the second iteration of the prototype, and adding even more data sets.