

How the public sector can drive digital adoption

3 challenges and opportunities



INTRODUCTION

Government at a digital crossroads

As technology continually shifts the landscape of the world we live in, both private and public sector organizations alike face a growing challenge to provide services through digital channels and quickly adapt to changes in society's expectations. IT modernization initiatives will likely accelerate as organizations prioritize the customer experience, but will these modernization efforts deliver the change they promise?

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed how organizations engage with both employees and its customers. Interactions and processes that once occurred face to face, transactions that previously took place in person or on physical paper, and countless other touchpoints shifted to the digital sphere. With that shift towards digital came challenges, but also opportunities.

In December of 2021, the White House released an [executive order](#) that focused on “transforming federal customer experience and service delivery to rebuild trust in government.” It came at a crucial time. The digital transformation of work and business continues to accelerate in the wake of the pandemic, and it's now impacting government at every level—federal, state, and local. By necessity, software is more important than ever to drive value for government employees and citizens. Software is now the primary means through which to accomplish key workflows, transactions, and processes.

If these efforts are to deliver the change they promise, there are three key challenges facing the public sector that must be addressed when it comes to digital transformation:

- **User experience:**
How can government agencies improve the digital experiences of employees and customers alike? What are the key steps to take, and how can feedback from employees and constituents help make digital interaction with government better?
- **Equity:**
Agencies need to make sure digital transformation meets all stakeholders where they are. How do they create a reality where all groups, including traditionally underserved ones, have equitable access to and experiences with the new digital touchpoints and processes?
- **The right key performance indicators (KPIs):**
With digital transformation comes the need to measure things differently than in the past. What are the right metrics, both employee- and customer-facing, that the public sector should be prioritizing and tracking, and how should they go about measuring them?

These three challenges are all connected to one another, of course. Each in its own way is a reflection of a new reality: the necessity of engaging through digital channels. For better or worse, *every organization—government included—is now a software organization*. By taking the right steps, the public sector can ensure it's for the better.

User experience

Help government customers and employees alike have the best possible digital experiences

More so than for private sector businesses, the notion of what constitutes a customer for government agencies varies widely. Whether it's someone filing their taxes, a company or individual applying for a public sector grant, a student enrolling in a state university, or a person renewing their driver's license, government as a whole casts a wide net when it comes to customers. The same is true for employees: Consider the wide array of agencies, the purposes they serve, and the many roles within them. With such a diverse set of users, government agencies need to bear in mind how they vary, both in their wants and needs and in terms of their technical skills and abilities.

Because of new government regulations and directives like the executive order mentioned above, many agencies are beginning to build what are essentially product management teams to understand and prioritize the user experience within apps and design products and workflows to improve it. From their inception to their retirement, these products need to be continuously improved to ensure agencies and customers are getting the most value out of them. Product teams will often undertake user research by traditional means—sending surveys, convening focus groups, and employing other methods to collect qualitative feedback. But the data on which they base decisions should be quantitative as well.

See the flow of engagement across time

Robust analytics allow public sector leaders to see which users are engaging, and how. Which features or workflows are they using most often? Where are they getting stuck? What features are they most often requesting? Knowing the answers to these and other core questions can help public sector organizations prioritize fixes and improvements, as well as give them a sense of what's working best. Organizations mature in product management use software such as [Pendo](#) to leverage these analytics holistically in one platform.

Give users vital context and customized guidance

As mentioned above, users of public sector digital services vary widely in almost every aspect. That includes frequency of engagement. A student paying a state tuition bill or an individual paying taxes once a year has very different expectations and needs than a government employee who engages in a workflow daily or weekly. Public sector organizations should be able to meet the needs of both at scale, and do so within the software users are engaging with at that moment.

“By getting the right information to the right person at the right time, government organizations will be able to improve the user experience for all.”

The same software that can give public sector organizations a window into their user experience can be used to improve that experience via the creation of in-app notifications and guides. Creating and deploying these guides helps users in a variety of ways. For customers who are engaged in filling out a digital form only once or at extremely infrequent intervals, for example, it can provide helpful context for different fields and help users complete the process the way it was meant to be, in compliance with any regulatory requirements. For users who undertake a given process or workflow regularly, it can provide helpful messaging about coming updates or changes, give context to new fields, and proactively solicit feedback from users about their experience. By getting the right information to the right person at the right time, government organizations will be able to improve the user experience for all.

Equity

Ensure all stakeholders, including traditionally underrepresented groups, have equal access to and experiences with public sector digital tools

Related to the question of user experience is one of user access. The nature of modern life makes it so that almost every U.S. citizen and resident has to interact with a government agency in some form or fashion. And since the spring of 2020, that has meant interacting digitally. So what happens when people lack either the knowledge or the means to access government services in this way? Think of residents of heavily rural areas without access to broadband or internet by other means. Or Americans living below the poverty line without the ability to regularly use a computer. Since the public sector is supposed to be accountable to all, digital systems that underserved communities and other stakeholders cannot use are by definition failed systems.

Understand your user base today to drive equitable outcomes tomorrow

For this reason, equity is a priority in digital transformation. Government must, per the executive order mentioned above, “work to deliver services more equitably and effectively, especially for those who have been historically underserved.” And the first step in ensuring equitable access is taking an audit of who is using digital public sector services now.

“Since the public sector is supposed to be accountable to all, digital systems that underserved communities and other stakeholders cannot use are by definition failed systems.”

In other words, if public sector organizations want to build an equitable future, they need transparency into what their user base looks like at present. They need software that will give them a window, via robust analytics, into who is accessing their services and how they

are interacting with them. Are certain segments of users struggling to complete certain processes? Are there users that one would expect to be engaging with an agency's digital infrastructure given greater demographic data, but for some reason are not? Having these and other insights will help organizations form the right digital strategy to advance equity.

To take but one example, [consider](#) how the U.S. Forest Service is working to optimize the Recreation.gov website, on which the public can familiarize itself with national parks, campgrounds, and other attractions. Backed by data and feedback, they're taking steps to improve the site's accessibility to communities lacking high-speed internet, making sure the public in all its diversity can enjoy and take advantage of what's on offer.

The right KPIs

Digital metrics the public sector should focus on measuring and improving

With the shift to digital for previously in-person or paper transactions, workflows, and processes comes the opportunity to measure these activities in a way never thought possible before. It's important that public sector branches and agencies are tracking the correct KPIs, but which ones? And how do they best go about tracking them and improving them?

You are what you measure

To a large extent, the answers to these questions will depend on the services being offered. Partnering with business transformation experts such as [Grant Thornton](#) can help agencies understand the customer journey and how to measure it at key moments. It's important to discern which KPIs matter most for which context. For example, a public sector organization that launches a new piece of software, be it either employee- or customer-facing, will want to track how many users are adopting it within a certain time window.

“In recent years, the annual paperwork burden imposed by executive departments and agencies...on the public has been in excess of 9 billion hours.”

But no matter what the specific agency or digital project, there's one overarching KPI that the public sector as a whole should focus on: time spent completing a process or workflow. This is something that the White House executive order specifically called out. “In recent years, the annual paperwork burden imposed by executive departments and agencies...on the public has been in excess of 9 billion hours. That number is too high,” it warned.

Reduce time, increase satisfaction

If the public sector wants to reduce the administrative burden on both the public and its own employees, a combination of powerful analytics and in-app messaging is the answer. Specialized software lets you see the user journey across apps, across time, and spot the areas where they aren't progressing. Agencies can then experiment with different means—giving contextual [guidance in-app](#), altering workflows in more user-friendly ways, etc.—and test which approach works best. This results in users spending less time completing these processes, and being more satisfied with the interaction as a result.

The path to public sector transformation

Transforming the public sector to optimize the customer and employee experience won't happen overnight. There's a reason that in popular culture, government services conjure images of long lines at the DMV or thick piles of confusing tax forms. The heavy regulatory environment makes it more difficult to drive change and lower the time spent on processes and transactions because it incentivizes minimal risk over innovation.

Fortunately, there's a fix for this problem: data. The insights that come from data not only help public sector teams discern what users' want and need from them, but also what the right course of action is. It therefore lowers risk and reduces the time it takes to drive change.

"It is the policy of the United States," says the executive order, "that, in a Government of the people, by the people, and for the people, improving service delivery and customer experience should be fundamental priorities." Thanks to the democratization of data, the tools and the means are there for anyone in the public sector to do precisely that.



The [Grant Thornton Public Sector](#) team helps executives and managers at all levels of government maximize their performance and efficiency in the face of ever-tightening budgets and increased demand for services. We help clients develop creative, cost-effective solutions using analytics and the latest technologies in order to enhance the management and operation of government.



[Pendo](#) helps teams of all sizes create the best user experiences possible. With Pendo's complete product adoption platform, you can combine retroactive usage analytics, in-app messaging, and feedback tools to better understand, guide, and close the loop with your users. And it all works at scale—no coding necessary. Pendo customers include the world's leading software companies and digital enterprises, including Verizon, Morgan Stanley, LabCorp, OpenTable, Okta, Salesforce, and Zendesk.