Looking Ahead: How the Executive Order Will Change Federal CX Leadership

Customer Experience Community of Interest
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American Council for Technology-Industry Advisory Council (ACT-IAC)

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Customer Experience (CX) Community of Interest

The Customer Experience COI strives to foster the evolution towards a human-centered government by leading the transfer of customer experience knowledge and expertise. This includes all aspects of supporting the citizen journey, from understanding customer expectations through training and educating leaders to understand the importance of being customer-centric.

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Introduction

President Biden’s new Executive Order (E.O.) 14058 on “Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government” may be the most comprehensive guidance on service delivery to date. Developed with deep expertise across government and industry, the executive order prescribes improvements to customer experience (CX) of critical life events requiring interaction with one or more agencies. This order contains several vital considerations for government leaders who receive this directive and must implement the changes.

Requiring agencies to use “service design and human-centered design,” shifts the conversation significantly. Both terms will require operationalizing empathy with practices like ethnographic research and participatory design to include the voices and experiences of the people they serve. Design thinking processes implied by human-centered design also ask government agency leaders to set aside outdated conventions of reactionary problem-solving in favor of collaboration across executive functions, programs, offices, and agencies.

To accomplish the outcomes laid out by the executive order, the government must develop the ability to measure and prioritize investments based on the needs of the people toward building trust. And trust begets collaboration and cooperation, both within government and the public. Hence, we must now incorporate metrics to collect feedback on experience into the success rubric for any program facing the public, ensuring overall accountability. Lastly, CX and service delivery priorities have sustained importance for three of the past consecutive administrations. Government leaders can expect this change to be bipartisan, and therefore likely to grow in significance to mission success.

Here are three key ideas that CX leaders must consider as they look ahead to designing programs, applications, and missions that will directly or indirectly provide services for the lives of 330 million residents of the United States.

Leaders must design government services to be an empathetic and supportive part of people’s lives.

The executive order evokes life events to lay out how “High Impact Service Providers (HISPs) agencies [must] commit to putting their customers at the center of everything they do.” According to the E.O., “[HISPs will go about] ...modernizing programs, reducing administrative burdens, and piloting new online tools and technologies.” Although subtle, the very act of distinguishing life events apart from agency requirements implies a design process for these tools and technologies that is inclusive of the customer’s perspective. The following life events have been called out, along with experience goals and technology investments required for each:
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- Retiring
- Filing and managing your taxes
- Surviving a disaster
- Traveling, financing education
- Managing VA health care and benefits
- Reducing barriers for those experiencing poverty
- Financing your business
- Supporting women, infants, and children
- Managing your health
- Updating your personal information once

It is essential to call out that well-meaning civil servants have felt restricted in their ability to provide a better customer experience due to the bureaucratic nature of services that have been designed from an inside out perspective and not from an outside in perspective. This E.O. would allow government agencies to finally include factors of mission success that have frustrated both employees and customers and to include elements like ease and simplicity, efficiency/speed, transparency of the process, or the value of the service itself aligned to the people they serve.

**Implementation will require an unprecedented amount of cross-agency, intra-agency, and public-private partnerships to be formed.**

What is not stated, but implicitly understood by many federal employees, is that these ideas are not exactly new. For example, the E.O. calls out “Filing and Managing Your Taxes” and states that “Filers will be provided with new online tools and services to ease the payment of taxes...” Leaders at the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) or other agencies are no strangers to the work this implies. It will require partnerships among the IRS and private banks, single sign-on login implementation, and a swath of strategic communications to opt-in or enroll, ensuring subscriber reach, modernization of complex financial systems, and multi-channel digital transformation. In addition, agencies will need to solicit feedback, suggestions, and partnerships from external entities like banks, trade associations, or even congressional oversight.

The friction when collaborating on CX initiatives across siloes or outside of their “swim lane” is a constant factor that is challenging to federal agencies and CIOs. What may be different this time is that collaboration is now mandatory because the executive order is focused on a customer-centric outcome rather than a singular objective for each agency. Perhaps this E.O. will accelerate and empower leaders to break silos, collaborate, and innovate toward tangible results, rather than achieve separate success targets.
Leaders undergoing digital transformation should prepare for a higher standard of accountability for safety, compliance, and inclusion for public-facing technology.

One departure from the previous administration’s approach to improving CX is comparing success to private industry. The last President’s Management Agenda (PMA) explicitly outlined the need for “government to catch up to industry standards.” There has been a tremendous rise of tools available for private sector CX. Customers have indeed become accustomed to innovative service delivery in private transactions. However, although government CX leaders can get inspiration from industry best practices, a simple copy and paste from private industry is not enough.

Significant differences between public and private sector technology come down to two major categories: incentives and compliance. In terms of incentives, for example, the industry only has market incentives to invest in features that genuinely address bias, diversity, equity, and inclusion. In contrast, the government cannot ignore large swaths of the population who do not serve their market strategy to, as the E.O. states, “...ensure no one is left behind.”

What remains true is that government leaders are currently held to an unfair assumption that they are unduly “behind.” This is not the case. By the nature of the free enterprise, companies can apply voluntary or market-driven considerations quickly and easily. They can just as easily stop. At the same time, federal agency leaders face accountability to the public. These compliance requirements are often demanding and due for reconsideration; they can also stall rapid innovation. However, as stewards of taxpayer money, government agencies and leaders are bound by these guard rails to ensure safety and prevent corrupt practices. Government leaders should feel empowered to continue seeking and building safe, reliable, and secure products that apply the same due diligence.

Some examples of compliance differences include:

- Paperwork Reduction Act (PRA) hurdles when collecting data on the voice of the people.
- Section 508 compliance to ensure accessibility to accommodate people with varying needs from disabilities with mobility, sight, and hearing.
- National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) and Authority to Operate (ATO) which puts the highest standard of cybersecurity compliance before it can be deployed.
- Adherence to Federal Acquisition Regulations (FAR) that place scrutiny and due diligence requirements for purchasing, which hinders quick adoption.
- Buy American Act requirements that restrict purchasing foreign products if any domestic alternative is available.
Conclusion and Next Steps

Both the inclusion of human-centered design in the E.O. and the three design considerations above provide some insight into how far this work has come in the last five or six years. In December 2015, the ACT-IAC Institute for Innovation published “Harnessing Life Events to Connect Citizens and Services: An Innovator’s Guide”, which outlined some practical methods and applications for conducting customer-focused service design practices. And in July 2018, the ACT-IAC Customer Experience Community of Interest published the “Customer Experience Playbook: A Guide to Transform Service Delivery” which further grew the practice of CX by including new methods, practices, and practical suggestions for removing barriers and burdens of implementation. Both the Guide and the Playbook served as a critical documents to the elevation of CX in service delivery, and as government agencies learn through experience, this latest addition to ACT-IAC CX guidance will further help agencies focus on designing services with users, developing meaningful outcome metrics, and focusing on government's key roles in delivering services to this country's residents. This COI recommends referring to these and earlier documents for methods, practices, and building support for CX in agencies. The ACT-IAC CX COI is available to consult and assist agencies working through their CX challenges in a non-competitive, supportive environment.

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References


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