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ACCELERATING AGILITY IN GOVERNMENT

The pace of global change across many dimensions—including technological, societal, environmental and health—has accelerated. Consequently, federal government programs must adapt to changing circumstances and be highly efficient and focused on outcomes, not process. Ensuring these goals presents an important opportunity for government leaders.

Governments can move rapidly, as we have seen with many elements of the COVID-19 response worldwide. However, this is not the usual course of action. There are many understandable constraints, which were discussed in the ACT-IAC Agenda 2021 capstone document, “Delivering Outcomes, Building Trust.” To overcome these constraints and foster agility, we recommend that the federal government move to an “Agile First” policy. Like the “Cloud First” and “Cloud Smart” policies of the previous administrations, Agile First can turn around the default way of operating and galvanize a more effective and adaptive government, delivering better outcomes.

This strategy will address the lack of agility in some programs and organizations that is understandable, but which does require action. Governments move cautiously because they operate and deliver essential services that Americans rely on, encompassing health, safety, economic stability, national security, and much more. Agencies follow complex laws and policies that lead to cumbersome regulation and oversight, and fear of operating “outside the lines.” Budget and acquisition processes are inflexible and time-consuming. Government programs are often developed over a long period of time, resulting in overlapping jurisdictions. For example, IT systems that were built for a previous generation are hard to change given the organizational and decision-making structures. These existing structures incentivize and promote a culture of preserving the status quo rather than facilitating responsiveness. To address this, we suggest implementing principles of agility to address this continuing problem, as identified in the chart below.

The government’s ability to deliver outcomes for the public is core to its mission and purpose. If government fails to meet expectations—if it doesn’t “work” for the public—faith and trust will continue to decline. As our recent challenges have shown, how agencies serve the public, protect the systems and information we rely on and respond and adapt to new opportunities and crises makes a great difference in perceptions about government effectiveness, and these three criteria are highly interdependent. The public expects and deserves a government that delivers accessible services which meet personalized needs; provides for efficient resilient infrastructure which protects information and systems and institutions from adverse events; and is agile and adaptable to meet emerging needs, which enables and embraces change.

This paper focuses on how to make an Agile First government a reality.

AGILE GOVERNMENT PRINCIPLES, AS DEFINED BY THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION’S AGILE GOVERNMENT CENTER, PROVIDE INSIGHT ON THE TENETS OF AGILE FOR GOVERNMENT:

AGILE GOVERNMENT PRINCIPLES
Mission should be extremely clear, and the organizational unit laser-focused on achieving it.

Metrics for Success should be widely agreed upon, evidence-based, and easily tracked.
Customer-Driven Behavior should include frequent interaction with program beneficiaries, and be ingrained in the culture.
Speed should be encouraged and facilitated through co-location where possible.

Empowered, highly skilled, cross functional teams should engage in continual face-to-face communication and should replace siloed bureaucratic systems.

Innovation should be rewarded—within the overall framework of existing rules and regulations—and changes in rules and regulations should be proposed and changed quickly where necessary.

Persistence should feature continuous experimentation, evaluation, and improvement in order to learn from both success and failure.

Evidence-based solutions should be the gold standard for creating program options.

Organizational leaders should eliminate roadblocks, aggregate and assume risk, and empower teams to make decisions.

Diversity of thought should be encouraged.
**CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

An Agile First policy should focus on three key drivers – the agility to adapt to a changing external environment; the agility to deliver services in the face of changing expectations and demands; and the agility to drive change internally on foundational capabilities that enable service delivery and reflect or align with the changing external environment. These drivers are co-dependent: the rapid pace of digital change creates new demands and expectations for services, as well as new opportunities, but agencies must be able to rapidly harness and adopt these advances in technology by modernizing their capabilities and more rapidly transitioning off old technology.

![Diagram](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Agility to Adapt in the Digital Age**

- The advent of COVID-19 has exacerbated the vulnerabilities that exist within our government, from our legacy information systems, education policies, and transportation systems to vaccine development. Rapid technological advancements will increase the pace of change and create new opportunities but will create a larger divide between winners and losers. Automation and artificial intelligence threaten to change industries faster than governments and economies can adjust. A reactionary government business model will not support the rapid changes that will be required to keep pace with a changing global reality. Government leaders and policies will need to be proactive and agile to meet the demands of the citizens they serve. Similarly, both Federal employees and the people served by government will need to keep up with their skills in order to adapt to the new digital reality.

- An adaptive government will overcome bureaucratic silos and structures—establishing a culture of innovation requires pushing decision-making down and focusing on processes and documentation that drive customer value. Adaptive government also fosters a culture that rewards experimentation and recognizes and celebrates the importance of risk taking and even failure in pursuit of innovation. Indeed, if the government were to foster a safe environment that rewards smaller, faster, cheaper, experiments focused on the minimally viable instead of the perfect, more opportunities for innovation would appear and the risk of large-scale failures would be mitigated.

**Agility to Deliver Customer-Focused Government**

**Necessity of Proactivity in Service Delivery**

- The COVID-19 pandemic surfaced an urgent necessity for proactivity and collaboration required for agile agency responses. For example, early phases of the pandemic broke the status quo resistance to work across silos. In many successes, agility allowed expedited services deemed necessary to address the public need for services, and the transitional needs of the federal workforce. Evidently, some agencies were better equipped to respond with agility. Leaders who made proactive investments into telework and collaboration were ready to capture the opportunity for a seamless
transition and delivery of services. For example:

- The Veterans Affairs (VA) Telemedicine investments were scaled and delivered quickly, resulting in a surge of customer satisfaction.
- The General Services Administration’s Technology Transformation Services (TTS) within GSA worked with Health and Human Services (HHS) to quickly stand up a public facing Covid-19 website.
- Congress worked with agencies like the Department of the Treasury to quickly launch the CARES Act, based on lessons learned from the Recovery Act in responding to the previous (2009) economic crisis.

**Utilizing the Iterative Delivery Methods of Agile**

- Agile strategies minimize the risk of a “big bang” approach which requires investment toward the “entire” requirement without testing or feedback to ensure it was the correct solution. Additionally, a major tenet of agile philosophy is to deliver a minimally viable product, then iterate and improve. The “minimally viable regulatory framework,” identifies the shortest path to delivery, and eliminates anything not on the path without sacrificing compliance or process integrity. Embracing lean, iterative approaches to delivery by working in the agile framework ensures quick delivery of critical products and services to the public in a timely manner.

**Prioritizing Human Centric Delivery Over System-Centricity**

- For effective agile delivery of services, the government must prioritize designing services and systems with human centered design (HCD), starting with the end customer in mind (Improving Customer Experience and Transforming Service Delivery). Agility, when combined with human centered practices around customer experience (CX) outcomes ensure that Agencies are able to optimize investments and capture opportunities from emerging technologies toward constant innovation. Service delivery requirements, as opposed to fixed requirements of physical “products” like roads or buildings, are changing and unpredictable. Designing services for CX excellence forces priority on impact by placing the needs of the customer over system-centric, bureaucratic processes and policies. This allows for a cycle of discovery, co-creation, and collaboration that breaks down system centricity over time. Breaking down system-centricity fosters the principles needed to create the environment for agility to take place.

**Agility to Modernize Government Technology**

- Many federal IT systems represent the automation of now-outdated policies and processes developed over many decades. The current environment ultimately drives up IT costs and lowers productivity by consuming valuable resources to just “keep the lights on.” Upwards of 80% of federal IT spending is on maintaining legacy systems. This situation poses significant barriers to agility, including:
  - Limited ability for IT to deliver modern services due to the management of legacy, on-premise systems.
  - Too much time spent on maintaining legacy technology instead of delivering services.
  - Poor integration between disparate data sources, processes and tools.
  - Outdated approaches to cybersecurity that increases system vulnerability.
  - Lack of real-time visibility, making it nearly impossible to make informed decisions on how to improve.
  - Positive change in this area requires a focus on IT infrastructure, applications, and data.

**IT Infrastructure**

- The federal government has focused on improving the management of IT infrastructure for more than a decade, and there has been real progress. Initiatives and legislation such as FITARA, the MGT Act, and OMB policies such as Cloud First, Cloud Smart, and Data Center
Consolidation / Optimization have created positive momentum for a government-wide movement to more modern IT systems that support more agile government. In addition, cloud adoption and the movement to virtual cloud infrastructure can actually enhance cybersecurity if accompanied by the use of modern and intelligent software. Building on this progress can help government move to advanced, consumption-based, rapidly reconfigurable cloud and networking architectures. Now, commercially available artificial intelligence and machine learning capabilities can increase IT productivity by automating routine work and providing visibility across infrastructure, applications and data to achieve outcomes described below. These predictive tools offer insights to help agencies maintain the health of agency owned infrastructure and optimize cloud delivery and spend. As agencies move from reactive problem-solving to a preventive approach using operational intelligence and machine learning, their agility will increase.

Applications

- Legacy systems and “point solutions” comprise much current Federal IT on the applications side as well, resulting in agency silos and manual business processes. The current fragmentation creates complexity, leading to risk and high costs of maintaining aging technologies across government. This makes it difficult to support changing priorities efficiently and effectively. In addition, poor user experience makes it impossible to keep up with citizens’ digital demands.

- Application changes must be tied to process and organization change, which is often driven by legislation and sometimes by new policy. Agencies should focus on planning, prioritizing and tracking work aligned to the policy initiatives. This requires both enterprise wide portfolio management to link IT and mission objectives, and visibility into IT spending and agency strategic plans to ensure value creation. Absent these approaches, agencies will face barriers in modifying or replacing applications when policies shift.

- Recent efforts to integrate Technology Business Management (TBM) into agency budget processes should be continued and used to help drive application modernization. In addition, streamlining information collection processes under the Paperwork Reduction Act and reducing timelines to reach a new Authority to Operate would accelerate application modernization.

Data

- A new cross-agency priority goal to “make data a strategic asset” kicked off with the publication of the Federal Data Strategy and the Year One Action Plan at the end of 2019. However, agencies also face the challenge of a lack of data integration. Manual efforts are often needed to tie systems and data together in meeting mission outcomes. These processes require workflow technologies and are excellent candidates for digitization. By leveraging platforms for creating digital workflows, agencies can eliminate the inherent risk of unstructured collaboration and gain agility to move quickly as the mission-based data needs demand.

- The data strategy emphasizes the need for data governance, a starting point for agility. This requires agencies to understand their data, a mandate with implications well beyond governance. If agencies do not understand the location and nature of their data, they will lack capacity to use and protect that data in support of their strategic goals. Whether the goal is to create an inventory of government data sets, manage high-value assets, or coordinate and use federal data to support the response to COVID-19, the process begins with data visibility. The government has started to move in this direction with the Federal Data Strategy and increasing presence of agency Chief Data Officers.

- Data classification is also key. Routine requests for information, such as an audit, FOIA or eDiscovery, often become time-sensitive and high-stakes searches and
retrieval efforts. Agencies need automated tools to quickly scan, cleanse, and tag data to ensure that sensitive information is known, protected, and properly shared. Classification also solves a critical emerging problem; the rapid growth of unstructured data can slow agency use, increases the risk of data loss, and decreases agility. Accessible, categorized, updated, standardized and cataloged data is foundational to increased use of intelligent automation and machine learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Building on the general recommendations outlined in "Delivering Outcomes, Building Trust," we recommend a number of specific actions to promote agility in how agencies can deliver outcomes and build trust. OMB should add agility across a range of existing policies and issue overarching guidance to reinterpret existing guidance that can be implemented in an Agile fashion. The recommendations discussed below could, for example, help to continue and expand the actions funded by IT Modernization Fund investment and increase the focus on shared agency modernization performance goals.

1. Catalog the programs and services of the Agency

Agencies do not have a comprehensive reference of all products and services provided by the agency, as well as those provided by other similar or relevant agencies. Pursuant to recommendations from several organizations including GAO, OMB should direct all departments and agencies to catalogue their programs and services that meet public needs in a transparent and consistent fashion, with a view towards proactive evaluation of policies and processes that can be streamlined, expedited, or removed as barriers to providing effective services. Many policies and requirements for programs to implement were set aside in the COVID–19 response in order to achieve timely responses.

OMB should also direct agencies to assess how programs can better deliver services. Ultimately, agencies should be expected to establish transparent and clear guidelines and delegate decision–making to prevent administrative and bureaucratic barriers to implementation.

2. Develop an initiative to change culture among Federal managers and enhance managerial accountability for progress in agency agility

The Leading Change Senior Executive Service Executive Core Qualification is often one of the least developed skills for incoming executives. A combination of coaching, training, and experiential learning can help to shape government leaders. A big required change is in mindset and approach to leadership. Leaders do not have all the answers—they should not pretend that they do.

OMB's Office of Personnel and Performance Management should issue guidance that helps agency leaders to enable the talented and highly qualified people they hired and trained to make decisions. OMB could leverage Government Performance and Results Act and the Program Management Improvement Accountability Act to drive this guidance forward. Key objectives would be to flatten organizational structures and to change manager roles from "managing/directing" staff to focusing on their role as enablers and servant leaders:
• Coaching staff and enabling/empowering them to succeed.
• Establishing a culture of innovation.
• Establishing an environment of continuous learning/evolution.
• Delegated/Decentralized decision-making.

Flattening an organization and empowering individuals to be able to make quick decisions greatly improves the chance of success. Empowering those closest to the product or service is critical to delivering value. Leadership chains and the time required to get leaders smart about product/service decisions cost time, money, frustrate staff, and often lead to the wrong decisions. Ultimately, leaders who cannot be involved daily need to delegate to someone who can act as the voice for the customer and interact with the team as frequently as the team requires.

3. Reduce Bureaucracy and Smash Silos

Focus on reducing waste and organizing multi-disciplinary teams that pledge allegiance to delivering value to the customer instead of adding/maintaining bureaucracy and building unnecessary kingdoms. To become more customer-centric and focus on what delivers value to the customer, the government should work towards establishing multi-disciplinary, self-organizing teams that are empowered to make decisions and challenge policy, processes, and documentation requirements that do not add value.

This means that leaders feel comfortable with challenges to the status quo and leaders are active in cleaning out policy, process, and required documentation that does not add value for the customer/end-user. This would reduce bureaucracy, minimize organization silos, and ensure a focus on value delivery.

4. Commit to Agility at the Organization Level, but Start Small and Embrace Failure and Learning

Commitment to agility and being customer-centric requires leadership to understand the concepts and buy into where this new vision will take the organization. Without that most change efforts, particularly those that incorporate culture, are dead in the water. With top-down commitment and understanding, agencies leaders should identify champions who are excited about the change and can enable staff to execute on the vision.

Agency leaders should start small and consider targeting pilot teams, departments, or initiatives that are product centered. Government entities that are truly innovative and on the cutting edge of adapting change must be able to experiment. As any scientist knows, with any experimentation comes success, but only after initial failure(s).

Leaders should establish parameters for experimentation and embrace the possibility (and likelihood) of failure, so long as it is fast, cheap, and teams learn from that experiment. Each experiment, failure, and eventual success will generate significant new learning and understanding that should be celebrated and shared broadly across the organization.

5. Adopt commercial approaches to modernizing information technology and digital transformation

OMB and the Chief Information Officers’ Council should ensure that Cloud Smart and related infrastructure modernization efforts continue as agencies adopt platforms for infrastructure, applications, and data. However, these actions alone are not enough. Agency CIOs must go further by aligning infrastructure to program delivery and policy initiatives. This requires a focus on applications and a “platform as a strategy” mindset. Commercial technology platforms speed application development and simplify digital transformation efforts. In addition, the increased flexibility, interoperability and visibility of commercial platforms reduce risk and lower costs.
OMB and the Chief Data Officers’ Council should continue to lead agencies in focus on implementing the Federal Data Strategy with a focus on data governance. Fragmented data environments across multiple cloud infrastructures further complicate this process. Leveraging technologies for data integration will help the government answer today’s challenging questions. This supports transparency, improved customer experiences, ultimately inspiring public trust in government. This in turn increases the Administration’s ability to move fast and be agile.

There are many more specific actions that can be taken. These are addressed in our series:

**Agenda 2021**
**Delivering Outcomes – Building Trust**
**A Guide for the Future of Government Agenda**

ACT-IAC stands ready to help advance these ideas into action. Please contact us at https://www.actiac.org/contact-us or 703-208-4800.