A NEW JOURNEY FOR GOVERNMENT:
THE PATH TO BETTER DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In today's competitive environment, companies know that stellar customer service can make or break their business. Failure to meet or exceed expectations can mean the difference between repeat customers and lost revenue.

In government, the focus on improving customer service has been less pronounced. In many cases, government is the sole provider of a particular service, and oftentimes those services have not been optimized to meet the needs of increasingly tech savvy customers.

But with the voice of citizens being heard more via social media and online technologies, all of that has recently started to change. It's a new age of customer service. But government is no Uber, Amazon or any other well-funded private-sector tech startup that understands the best ways to serve and interact with people online. So how is the public sector supposed to keep up? How can it redefine customer service in the 21st century when the budgets and skills may not be there? What exactly does good customer service mean when it comes to government? And why does this need to happen now?

The good news is that improving customer service is being prioritized at the highest levels of state, local and federal government, and agencies are using digital solutions to drive that change.

The White House released its digital strategy in May 2012, which established a year-long roadmap for building a 21st century government that delivers better digital services to the public.

The main objectives of the Digital Government Strategy were clear:

- Enable citizens and an increasingly mobile workforce to access high-quality digital information and services anywhere, anytime and on any device.

- Ensure the government adapts to the new digital world by procuring and managing devices, applications and data in a smart and secure manner

- Unlock the power of government data to spur innovation and the quality of citizen services.

Since the strategy's release, federal agencies have made a concerted effort to embrace a "digital-first" mindset. They are rethinking manual processes and opening the door to more dynamic and online self-service offerings long provided to consumers by private companies. The creation of digital services teams at the White House, the General Services Administration, the Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Defense and others across government is helping to institutionalize a commitment to digital services.

Federal agencies aren't the only government entities embracing more modern online platforms and applications – state and local governments are getting in on the action, too. The city of Los Angeles is powering its digital transformation by providing new Web experiences for its residents that are mobile responsive and driven by smart data. The city also consolidated about a dozen websites, including the main LACity.org site. Dozens of other sites have been targeted for consolidation in the near future, with the goal of making them better gateways to public services. The ultimate goal is to build resilient, highly available websites that provide a compelling user experience.

It has become clear: No longer can government treat digital services as nice to have; they're a must-have. Agencies must also view the citizens they serve as valued customers who expect engaging and user-friendly experiences and transactions online. Government is in the midst of a digital revolution, and it's beginning to address the challenges and opportunities of delivering the services that today's public expects.

To help government along this path to better digital engagement and customer service, GovLoop and Acquia partnered to explore how agencies are prioritizing digital services, what challenges they face, and the tools and techniques they are using to overcome those barriers.

In a recent GovLoop survey of more than 120 federal civilian and defense, state and local public-sector employees, 75 percent said government is starting to place more of a priority on better citizen services via digital platforms. More than half of those surveyed said external end users of their organizations' services, including citizens and businesses, are driving service improvements.

You'll find highlights from this survey throughout this research brief, in addition to insight from public- and private-sector experts.

To help agencies reimagine digital engagement, GovLoop spoke with Dan Katz, Technical Director of Public Sector at Acquia, about what makes a great customer experience. We also spoke with Los Angeles Chief Information Officer Ted Ross to hear how the city is embracing digital services and how government can proactively meet the needs of citizens.

In this research brief, we explore:

- What digital engagement entails
- Barriers to improving citizen services through digital platforms
- How governments are improving citizen services
- Tips for creating better digital engagement

But before embarking on the journey to better digital services and citizen engagement, it's vital to first understand what these terms mean for government and its customers.

WHAT DOES DIGITAL ENGAGMENT MEAN FOR GOVERNMENT?

Governments at all levels are starting to realize the benefits of making customer-facing websites, online tools and mobile apps more intuitive and accessible. These investments not only save agencies time and money in the long term, but they also improve the overall user experience.

The key, however, is not just focusing on going digital, but also emphasizing customer engagement.

Digital engagement is about providing users the ability to accomplish their task quickly and easily via their preferred digital means, in a way that leaves them extremely satisfied with the experience and compelled to engage again. Digital engagement is about more than a smartphone app or a website, but rather the overall experience of using those tools that allow citizens to engage with their government in a meaningful way.

Today, both of those efforts are more important than ever for the public sector. According to a 2015 Pew Research Center study, 40 percent of smartphone owners have used their phones in the past year to search for government services or information. Even

more importantly, between October and December 2015, more than 1.5 billion people visited federal websites from their desktop computers and mobile devices to check weather forecasts, apply for Social Security benefits, view photo requirements for visa applications, apply for and manage veterans benefits, and much more.

In many cases, government is the only entity that provides a particular service, so there isn't competition from rival organizations or an urgency to improve services. But government today is realizing that mindset isn't good for business or for the citizens they serve.

"It's still extremely important to have a good user experience, even if government may be the only one to provide that service," Ross said. "If people are leaving your page before they click on anything, they're not finding what they're looking for and you need to change your page."
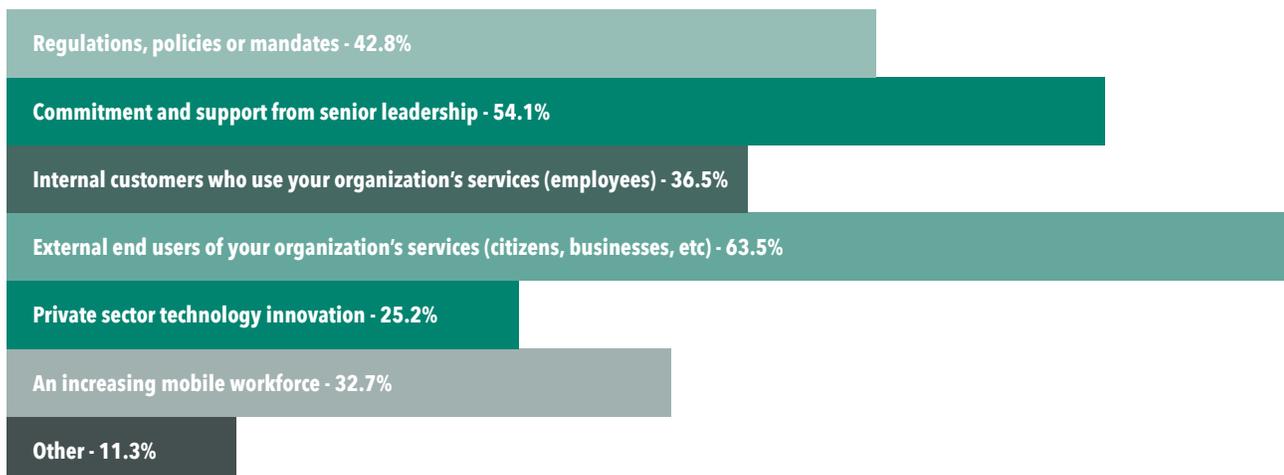
But fostering strong digital engagement can be easier said than done. In the next section we explore the top challenges agencies face and how they can address those barriers.

In your opinion, is government starting to place more of a priority on better customer service via digital services?
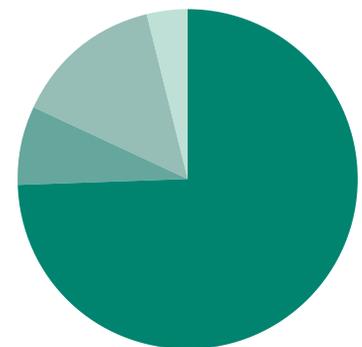
- Yes - 74.7%
- No - 7.4%
- Unsure - 14.2%
- Other - 3.7%

What is driving customer service improvements at your organization? Select all that apply:

- Regulations, policies or mandates - 42.8%
- Commitment and support from senior leadership - 54.1%
- Internal customers who use your organization's services (employees) - 36.5%
- External end users of your organization's services (citizens, businesses, etc) - 63.5%
- Private sector technology innovation - 25.2%
- An increasing mobile workforce - 32.7%
- Other - 11.3%

BREAKING BARRIERS TO DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

It takes time to institutionalize change in government. Every office and agency has its unique culture and way of doing business. But even if everyone is on board with adopting a new technology or process, other challenges persist.
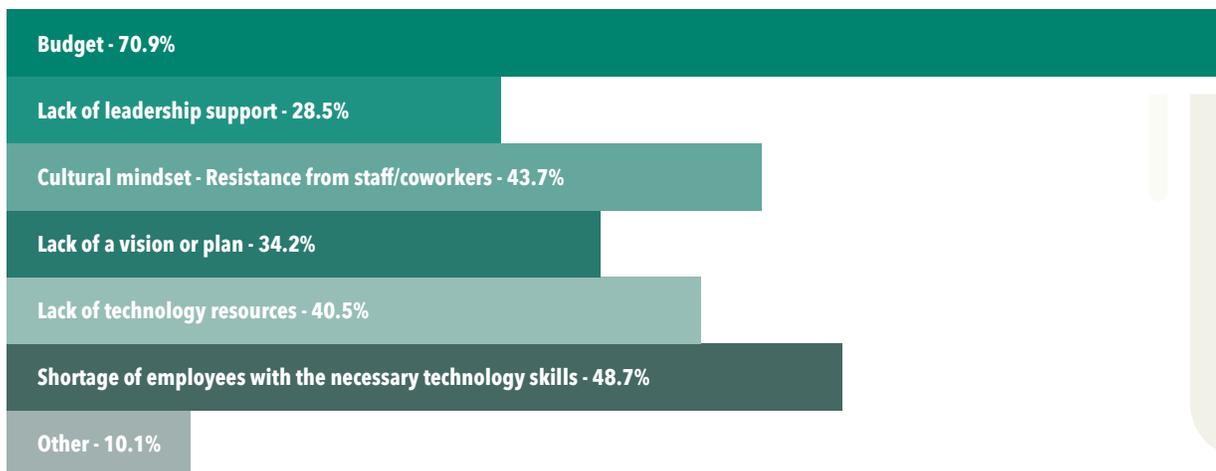
More often than not, the greatest obstacle standing between a good idea and execution is funding. For the government, budget constraints are the biggest barrier to improving customer service. Seventy-one percent of GovLoop survey respondents cited lack of funding as the top challenge.

L.A.'s CIO Ted Ross knows firsthand that budget challenges can be daunting, but they can also present new opportunities.

"My department has lost over 40 percent of its people in the last six years," he said. "We've suffered huge reductions. But I think it ends up stressing some very important things: Innovation isn't necessarily expensive."

Each of the challenges listed here represent some of the biggest barriers governments face when it comes to improving citizen services. Underneath each challenge you'll find solutions to help you overcome those barriers

What are the biggest barriers to improving customer service? Select all that apply:

Budget - 70.9%

Lack of leadership support - 28.5%

Cultural mindset - Resistance from staff/coworkers - 43.7%

Lack of a vision or plan - 34.2%

Lack of technology resources - 40.5%

Shortage of employees with the necessary technology skills - 48.7%

Other - 10.1%

BARRIER #1: BUDGET

Seventy-one percent of survey respondents cited lack of funding as their biggest barrier to providing better services.

SOLUTION: The fact is, improving services you already have doesn't have to cost a lot. Where feasible, take advantage of reusable platforms and tools already in use at other government agencies. The time and money that would've been spent brainstorming new ideas can instead be spent engaging with customers to better tailor the user experience to meet their needs.

"The value of that information is probably going to be higher, and it's probably going to be different from what you expected," Katz said about customer feedback. "It only takes an investment of time to talk and listen."

Social media can be a helpful tool for gaining insight and sharing feedback with customers on what services are currently provided and what will be available in the future.

Although online services, such as websites, are the primary digital engagement platform agencies use to provide mission-critical information and services to citizens, social media isn't far behind. Sixty-seven percent of GovLoop survey respondents are using social media to better serve and inform customers about important dates, public safety issues, and government services.
"Social media is a great front door, and it's ubiquitous," Katz said.

For some consumers, it's easier to tweet their questions or concerns than to leave a com-ment on a website or pick up the phone. Some agencies worry that users' social media comments may get out of hand or be too critical, but that's a part of being vulnerable and transparent.

Remember, customer feedback — coupled with data that shows how people are using government services — can offer valuable insight and provide a justification for making certain investments.

BARRIER #2: STAFF

Forty-nine percent of respondents cited a shortage of employees with the necessary technology skills for creating a better customer experience.

SOLUTION: Teaming up with organizations like Code for America, GSA's 18F or other groups that focus on improving digital services, can be a great way to temporarily fill talent gaps needed to implement better services and improve citizen engagement.

Despite the impressive work these organizations are doing, they may be one of the government's best-kept secrets. We asked survey respondents about the impact of USDS and 18F on their organizations, and 54 percent said they hadn't heard of either group. Eighteen percent said USDS and 18F have had little to no impact on their organizations, and only 4 percent said they have received technical support from these groups to improve customer service.

In your opinion, what impact are organizations such as the General Services Administration's 18F and the White House's U.S. Digital Service having on your organization?
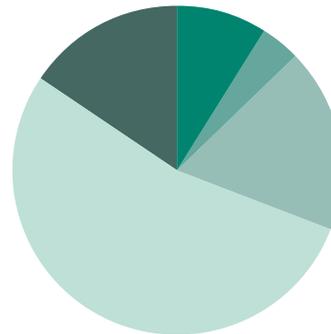
- ■ We have used resources & playbooks published by these organizations - 9.0%
- ■ We have received technical support from these organizations to improve services - 3.9%
- ■ The work at 18F & U.S. Digital Service has had little to no impact on my organization - 18.0%t
- ■ What are 18F & U.S. Digital Service? - 53.9%
- ■ Other - 15.4%

GSA's 18F and USDS provide a number of online tools for governments to use, including a Digital Services Playbook, tips for agile development and consulting services for IT modernization, acquisition projects and more.

If your agency does not have access to organizations like 18F or USDS, there are other options for supplementing your in-house talent. Inviting the community to help you solve challenges through hackathons and partnering with local colleges and universities can open doors for attracting new talent into your organization and collaborating with the community to improve citizen services.

My agency provides mission-essential information and services to citizens (customers) via digital engagement platforms in the following ways:

- Online Services - 80.4%
- Online Transactions - 41.8%
- Real-Time Updates - 29.4%
- Mobile Apps - 32.0%
- Datasets - 28.8%
- Social Media - 67.3%

BARRIER #3:
CULTURE

Forty-four percent of GovLoop survey respondents said a cultural mindset and resistance from staff were hindering efforts to improve customer service.

SOLUTION: Sometimes the fear of the unknown can lead employees to resist change. Other times it's complacency with the way things have always been done. Either way, government isn't known for easily changing internal culture and norms around new technology.

But it can be done. Addressing these cultural issues requires open and honest communication with employees. They need to understand what changes are being considered and what will be implemented, as well as what those changes mean for them and the way they work.

"Customer service is really about human interaction and culture," Katz said.

Customer service must become a core mission of your agency. Government is striving to reach that goal, and some federal agencies have hired Chief Customer Officers to make better services a priority.

If your agency doesn't have a Chief Customer Service Officer, there are other steps you can take to get skeptical employees on board with proposed changes.

One way is to allow employees to test new technologies and processes before they are fully implemented. This can help to ease tensions and create a collaborative environment where everyone involved can address problems collectively.

BARRIER #4:
TECHNOLOGY

Forty-one percent said a lack of technology resources is their biggest barrier to improving services.

SOLUTION: Open source software tops the list of technologies and tools that agencies are using to improve customer services, according to GovLoop's survey.

In terms of open source and digital cloud, the real value is not that it's free or cheaper, Katz said. "It's the agility and the time to market; the ability to take reusable components and put them together in new ways and leverage the collective knowledge and experience of other people who are building with similar technology and solving similar problems."

While speaking at MeriTalk's Cloud Computing Exchange Brainstorm in June 2015, Federal CIO Tony Scott stressed that while cloud computing can save money and make development more agile, the real advantage comes from cloud is speed to market and speed to solution.
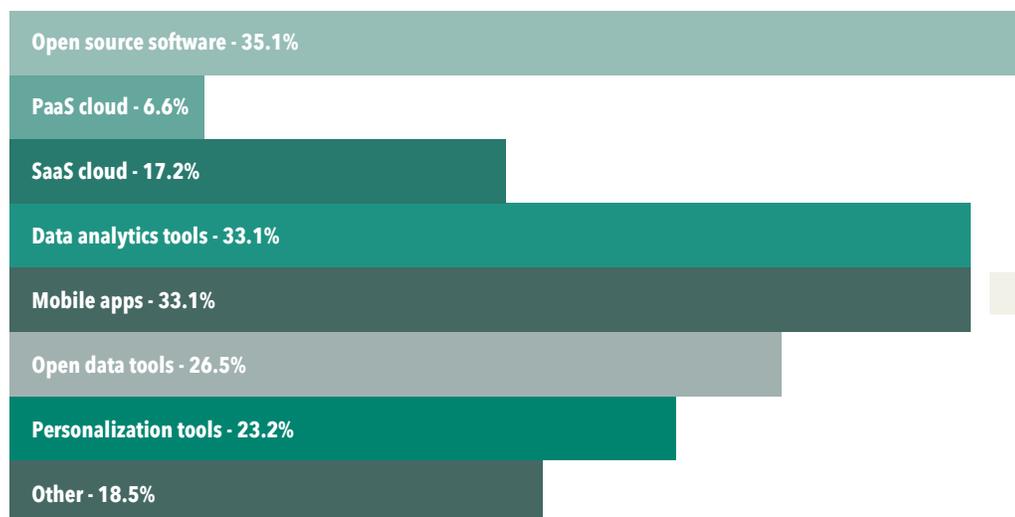
Cloud provides "speed to meet the needs of whatever our citizens need," Scott said. "We've got to draw the line and say, 'We're going to do everything we can to get faster and faster and faster to be competitive in the global economy.'"

Another perk open source provides is greater control of your destiny. You are not beholden to someone else's roadmap or product schedule.

"Open source is a great way to innovate," Ross said. "It may not be ideal for things like enterprise resource planning platforms because critical success factors for ERPs are very different from the Web. When it comes to the Web, you have a rapidly developing platform, and it's very important that we have a tool like Drupal so that we can innovate as the Web is innovating."

In Los Angeles, Ross and his team are using the power of open source to deliver better services to the city's nearly 4 million residents. You'll learn more about the city's journey to improve digital engagement and citizen services in the next section of this research brief.

What technologies and tools are you using to drive improved customer services? Select all that apply:

- Open source software - 35.1%
- PaaS cloud - 6.6%
- SaaS cloud - 17.2%
- Data analytics tools - 33.1%
- Mobile apps - 33.1%
- Open data tools - 26.5%
- Personalization tools - 23.2%
- Other - 18.5%

A NEW DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT PLATFORM IN LOS ANGELES

When it comes to size, Los Angeles is unlike most U.S. cities. It has almost 4 million residents across 469 square miles and some 250,000 businesses. To say city services play an important role in residents' everyday lives is an understatement.

Services like graffiti removal, pothole repair and special pickup of bulky items are among the most requested services by city residents. These aren't the sexy government services that make front-page news — that is, until they're not working — but they are the types of services that make life better.

"It's funny how we call these 311 services," said Ross, the city's CIO. "I always say 311, but we're talking about an old technology, right? We're talking about a phone number you dial. We've recently created a whole new digital engagement platform around these legacy concepts of 311."

The city worked with Acquia to launch LAcity. org on the Drupal platform in February 2015, and since then traffic has increased by 26 percent. Mobile traffic increased by 64 percent after the new platform was put in place.

Additionally, the city offers the MyLA311 app, which truly puts the power of City Hall in residents' hands. They can use the app to submit service requests, browse the city's social media feeds, pay water and power bills from their smartphones, and more.

During the last fiscal year, which ended June 2015, the city received almost 105,000 submissions for city services through its mobile app.

"Customers want better services, but we're also trying to be ahead of the game and be innovative and look out at other cities and [the] private sector to see if we can leverage their work," Ross said.

Finding the balance between reacting to residents' requests and proactively meeting their needs is an art. "Often what we find is it's a mix," Ross explained. "We feel a little bit like doctors at a hospital. Someone comes in and they say, 'I have a pain.' We ask, 'Where is it?' And often their response is kind of vague."

Residents might not always know how to articulate their specific pain points, but they do know when something isn't right and they want it fixed. After following up with residents, some said, 'We want an easier way of contacting the city and requesting services,'" Ross said. That was the catalyst for building the mobile app and using Drupal for its website.

"We try to make our services very easy to use, so our MyLA311 mobile app doesn't send you through 12 different screens," Ross noted. "It tries to keep it very simple, and we stress interaction. We emphasize not just digital, but engagement."

In many ways this is the same interaction residents would get if they called 311. The app provides the back-and-forth that residents need by giving them options and making selections easy. After they submit a request online, they can get updates via email.

Ross recently used the app to report a tree branch that was leaning over a power line. He was able to quickly snap a picture and submit a request to the city.

"Fundamentally, I think what's really important is citizens want to make sure they're heard,"

Ross said. "It's not very hard to say, 'We've received what you asked for,' and then when it's resolved saying, 'We resolved it.' That's a great example of digital engagement."

Like many in government, Ross knows the challenge of trying to improve services in the face of hardships. His department has lost more than 40 percent of its staff in the past six years. But in some ways, this constraint has actually birthed creativity and inventiveness.

"I think it ends up stressing some very important things," Ross said. His advice for other cities:

- **Remember that innovation isn't necessarily expensive.** There are a lot of innovative things agencies can do that are low-cost or no-cost, simply by using their existing platforms.

- **Understand the new social media platforms.** Learn how people interact with one another using those platforms. Use responsive design when building websites so they work on mobile devices and are accessible for people with disabilities.

- **Sit down and really think about the customer**. Focus on their lifestyle, where they are and what they're doing. Then figure out how city services can try to engage them and make their lives easier.

"Maybe change starts off with the low-hanging fruit, or maybe it starts off with the most popular items," Ross said. "The best recommendation, from a technology perspective, is to invest in the types of platforms that give you flexibility and the opportunity to change with the times."

YOUR DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT ROADMAP

Government officials must keep in mind that digital engagement isn't a monologue; it's a dialogue. Citizens want to communicate with their governments, and engaged residents provide valuable feedback that improves services and quality of life for everyone. They also are more informed and empowered to make better decisions. For government, engagement involves:

- Continuous **communication** with citizen customers — the residents.
- Continuous **evaluation** of the level of services being provided.
- Continuous **improvement** of those services, based on customer feedback.

Citizens want a more customer-friendly interaction with government, and the good news is the government is stepping up to meet those expectations. But technology alone is not what makes the difference. What matters most is how government employees use it every day to make a real difference in people's lives.

"I think right now what we're seeing is really strong intention," Katz said. "The troops are being rallied. We see federal agencies hiring Chief Customer Officers and more executives from the private sector coming in talking about removing barriers. But I think we're still in the early stages of implementation."

L.A.'s Ross noted that although the city offers services to millions of residents, ensuring that they are aware of what's available is also part of the challenge.

"We're always fighting to make sure they understand what services are available to them," Ross said. "We try to make our services very easy to use."

To help you on your journey to improve digital engagement, here are some tips to keep in mind:

1. UNDERSTAND WHO YOUR PRIMARY USERS ARE & WHAT THEY NEED.

This can be achieved through various methods, including focus groups, open dialogue via social media, and by using data. Web analytics can tell you a lot about what digital services are being used and where in the process users become disengaged. If there are particular groups or organizations that use your data frequently, consider reaching out to them for input on customer improvements.

2. BUILD EXCITEMENT FOR DIGITAL SERVICES & BETTER ENGAGEMENT.

Find people within your organization who have a passion for these types of projects. They may or may not be in your office. Either way, be open to input and help from colleagues who have different but valuable perspectives. Sharing success stories from other agencies can also garner excitement and help employees and senior leaders understand what is possible within your organization.

3. IMAGINE WHAT THE USER EXPERIENCE WILL LOOK & FEEL LIKE FROM START TO FINISH.

Put yourself in the user's shoes. How easy or difficult is it to find online services? How many clicks does it take to access a particular service online, and is the process simple and intuitive? This exercise may require help from people who can lend a fresh set of eyes and share feedback that may not have been considered. Also think about metrics for determining how well the service is working for users.

4. SEEK OUT PARTNERSHIPS.

When the time comes to develop a new or existing online service, make sure you have the right team in place to execute the plan. That team may consist of private-sector partners, members of the community, or specialized teams from organizations such as Code for America, 18F and USDS. Ensure there is open and honest communication between all members of the team about the overall vision, deployment schedule and how that service will be maintained and improved.

CONCLUSION

The government, after a slow start, is finally making inroads into understanding and providing better customer service and digital capabilities. But the industry faces significant challenges, as showcased in our survey results.

Government agencies must operate on tighter budgets and with smaller team sizes. Many knowledgeable and experienced employees are retiring, further undermining agencies' ability to effectively serve customers. Today's citizens and stakeholders demand fast, accurate answers from government agencies, and they will clearly express their dissatisfaction if those expectations are not met. Citizens now expect to deal with agencies through a myriad of communications channels, including phone, e-mail, the web, mobile devices, social media and more.

But despite these significant obstacles, it's obvious that government is starting to rise to the customer service challenge. Changes are happening everywhere you look. As noted, the federal government has implemented digital-oriented organizations such as 18F and U.S. Digital Services to help agencies build better and more intuitive websites for citizens. Agencies are hiring more Chief Customer Officers, whose main role is to serve as the voice of the customer and help government implement change. Human-centered design efforts, in which sites and products are designed based on users' core needs, are driving government website redesigns across the nation.

By truly listening to citizens, making iterative changes in the technology that's used, being creative in the face of constraints, and changing culture to be more customer-oriented, government can achieve customer service greatness in all of its digital platforms. These challenges they're facing are also opportunities. By tackling them, we have started on a road to a truly digital government.

ABOUT ACQUIA

Acquia is the leading cloud platform for building, delivering, and optimizing digital experiences. Global organizations use the Acquia Platform to create a single, powerful digital foundation for delivering world-class customer experiences. With the Acquia Platform, organizations can realize the vision of personalized, contextual, and real-time customer engagement for the right person, at the right time, on the right device. These experiences can be easily deployed and managed at scale, for one to thousands of sites, driving transformative business results at breakthrough speed.

For more information, please visit acquia.com.

ABOUT GOVLOOP

GovLoop's mission is to inspire public sector professionals by serving as the knowledge network for government. GovLoop connects more than 200,000 members, fostering cross-government collaboration, solving common problems and advancing government careers. GovLoop is headquartered in Washington, D.C., with a team of dedicated professionals who share a commitment to the public sector.

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