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IT Modernization Starts by Focusing on Customer's Needs

Several Federal IT Executives Say Understanding User Experience Helps Shape New Capabilities

BY JASON MILLER

The Federal Aviation Administration received a gift from Congress back in 2015 – a clean sheet of paper to develop a registration system for drones.

The FAA had a short window to bring up the brand new application ahead of the expected excitement and buying spree during the holiday season.

And because a drone registration system had never been done before, the FAA could use the most modern technology concepts and capabilities available. As a huge bonus, and unlike most federal services, the FAA didn't have to put up with any legacy hardware or software.

"We built the registry in the cloud. We focused on user experience by building it all off one platform, which allows us to scale quickly," said James Stroiney, the acting deputy chief information officer at the FAA. "The big driving point for us was the culture shift from the business side to the user experience side. The old way of doing business with the manned aircraft world included six different login credentials, and few people understood how all the processes worked."

PANEL OF EXPERTS



John Everett, Executive Director for Demand Management, Department of Veterans Affairs



Ted Girard, Vice President, Public Sector, Okta



Beth Killoran, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Information Technology and Chief Information Officer, Department of Health and Human Services



André Mendes, Chief Information Officer/Chief Technology Officer and Acting Director, Office of Cuba Broadcasting, Broadcasting Board of Governors



Brian Merrick, Senior Advisor reporting to the Deputy Chief Information Officer of Foreign Operations, Department of State



Dominic Sale, Assistant Commissioner of Operations, FAS Technology Transformation Service, General Services Administration



Jeff Shilling, Acting Chief Information Officer & Chief of Information Technology, National Cancer Institute



Todd Simpson, then-Chief Information Officer, U.S. Food and Drug Administration



James Stroiney, Acting Deputy Chief Information Officer, Federal Aviation Administration



It was a good thing the FAA could start with a clean sheet of design paper, as citizens registered more than 300,000 unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in the first two months and more than 700,000 in the first two years since the FAA launched the Drone Zone.

Stroiney said now manned aircraft customers want the same experience as the UAV operators.

The FAA's experience is one many agencies wish they could have – building a modern system from the ground up.

Unfortunately for most agencies, they face a different type of challenge around moving legacy technology to modern platforms. The Office of Management and Budget reported in the fiscal 2019 budget request to Congress that **spending on legacy IT** remains around 80 percent of the federal IT budget.

This number has remained fairly static over the last five years despite a strong focus by OMB to move agencies away from old, insecure technologies.

This is why the Trump administration launched a more focused effort, which includes an IT modernization strategy and

the setting up of public-private sector experts in Centers of Excellence.

Federal News Radio convened a panel of federal and industry experts who delved deeper into how agencies need to modernize IT with the customer in mind.

Dominic Sale, the assistant commissioner of operations at the Federal Acquisition Service's Technology Transformation Service in the General Services Administration, said the administration is focusing on innovation both in terms of capabilities and approaches to modernization.

“What we don't want to do is just fix things. We want to go in and change things and change the people working with us in the agencies. We want to think of ourselves as connective tissue and not just a shot of adrenaline,” Sale said. “What I'm encouraged about is the focus on the customer and end user needs. This is why modernization has a chance of being different this time – because we are focused on the customer, and ‘customer experience’ and ‘contact centers’ are two of the five [areas] in the centers of excellence [initiative]. I don't think that's a coincidence. There's acknowledgement that maybe focusing on cloud and closing data centers before was the tail wagging the dog. At the end of the day, it should be how do we better serve our customers and it should be aligned with that.”

The focus on the customer is a theme that comes up often during the IT modernization discussion.

John Everett, the executive director for demand management at the Veterans Affairs Department, said his agency's goals with modernization are around enabling the customers to use services faster and more easily.

"We are moving toward a Bank of America or a USAA style of approach for our interaction with customers. This is where if you are on your mobile phone, you can log in one time and do everything you need to do right from there as opposed to going to Veterans Benefits Administration for one thing and Veterans Health Administration for another thing," Everett said. "We are moving in that direction. It's in its infancy right now, but we know what the vision is, and cloud will help us do that."

Everett said VA has about 621 applications that have the potential to move to the cloud today. Going forward, he said VA is taking the buy-before-build approach to new capabilities, particularly by using software-as-a-service.

VA's concept of making it easy for veterans to log-in once and get everything done no matter which part of the agency the service is coming from is not a new concept.

Agencies have struggled with the single sign-on approach for more than a decade.

Ted Girard, the vice president of public sector for Okta, said connecting the mission and the customer is really a data and identity challenge.

"It's about increasing the level of the consumer experience to get access to what they are supposed to get access to, while simultaneously increasing their security posture," he said.

Okta has helped the Justice Department and the Department of Veterans Affairs meet these two sometimes incongruent goals. Girard said Okta believes identity is the new security perimeter.

Girard said agencies need to be careful not to paint themselves into a corner by trying to make the legacy systems integrate with the new capabilities in the cloud, hanging up the modernization effort for months, if not years.

Girard said the government isn't alone in its struggles with legacy technology. Other industry sectors also are trying to move to new platforms and technologies.

But what's different for departments is the scale and regulations required to meet their needs.

Federal executives say it's because of those additional requirements that changing the IT governance structure is so important to making modernization a success.

Todd Simpson, the former CIO at the Food and Drug Administration and now the chief

product officer for the Department of Health and Human Services CIO, said his customers only want to know how they can meet their mission not what technology is approved or not.

“We have success at the FDA through a cloud brokerage and security brokerage model by being good listeners,” he said. “Sometimes it’s like the tail always wags the dog so at the end of the day you have to have governance in place so you don’t leave work mad because no one is happy about the IT being used.”

Brian Merrick, a senior advisor reporting to the deputy CIO of Foreign Operations at the State Department, said he experienced a similar challenge.

“Forcing an approach or an architecture doesn’t work. You have to be able to deliver, and that’s why the mission-focused model and mission-first approach make the most sense,” he said. “You have to make the approach attractive to the mission areas.”

Addressing the governance issues is especially important for federated agencies like HHS.

Simpson may have luck at his local level, but herding the cats across HHS is much more difficult.

Beth Killoran, the deputy assistant secretary for IT at HHS, said many times, IT modernization and governance starts with a coalition of the willing.

“You have to use those groups as change agents. As they see value or where those customers are satisfied or see decreased costs, then others will come. Because you can’t force and you can’t push the changes,” she said. “This is why we are looking at it from a multi-faceted perspective. We are saying you can keep all systems you want, but you have to be able to integrate that information with others. We need standards on how you will do that as well as some of the foundational pieces that need to be modernized, like the network or technical standards around cloud.”

Of course, all of these efforts also depend on having the right people and acquisition approaches.

Jeff Shilling, the acting CIO and chief of IT at the National Cancer Institute in HHS, said finding the right balance of innovation, like iterative or agile development, and standardization can help change the culture and overcome so many typical obstacles.

“The idea is there are no failures, just assessments and readjustments. As you move to your North Star, it is not a straight line,” he said. “We are doing value process mapping to better understand what would our customers pay for. There are a lot of non-value requirements. We have no way to adjust for that, especially if three-quarters of the processes don’t add value to curing cancer. That has to change and we have to focus on the value we and technology brings.”