How Human-Centered Design Can Help Restore Trust in Government

MARKET TRENDS REPORT

Introduction

People—as employees and as customers—are intrinsic to the federal government's work. But the focus hasn't always been on their experiences. For years, the public sector zeroed in on achieving the mission—whether it was national defense, tax collection or health services—by any means possible. And while it often attained its end goal, customer experience (CX) suffered. Trust in government suffered along with it.

Agencies were beginning to address user issues before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, but the health emergency brought the importance of CX—and trust—into razor-sharp focus. President Biden's Executive Order on Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government, issued in December 2021, underscored the link between the two. Accessibility and logistics in delivering services and products (think personal protective equipment and vaccines) took center stage.

"Our Government must recommit to being 'of the people, by the people, [and] for the people,'" it asserts. "Government must be held accountable for designing and delivering services with a focus on the actual experience of the people whom it is meant to serve."

To meet this call, agencies are focusing on human-centered design (HCD), a CX approach that allows for the development of innovative strategies to increase the positive impact of government programs on people nationwide. A customer-focused approach delivers effective policies, programs and services that support individual needs. And a government that comes through engenders trust.

HCD plays a particularly crucial role in federal health communications and services, where trust is paramount. In collaboration with National Government Services, GovLoop explored HCD, CX and how to use them to help the public and build confidence in government health agencies.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Customer Experience: "Customer experience (CX) is defined as the sum of all experiences a customer has with your organization. Since government is often a sole-source service provider (e.g., there's only one place to pay taxes, or get a driver's license), CX is even more important in the public sector than in other organizations." – Digital.gov's Customer Experience Toolkit

Human-Centered Design: "Human-centered design, also referred to as 'user-centered design,' is a methodology that incorporates feedback frwom the people for whom you are designing throughout the design process. The goal of human-centered design is to end up with a solution that is tailored to meet people's needs, with little wasted effort and reduced risk." – 18F

By The Numbers

Trust

24%

is how much trust for the Veterans Affairs Department has increased among veterans since 2016, through enterprise-wide, comprehensive CX efforts. (Source: Partnership for Public Service's Government For the People)

22%

of Americans said in April 2021 that they can trust the federal government to do what's right most of the time. (Source: Pew Research Center)

63.4

The federal government's score, out of 100, on the American Consumer Satisfaction Index (Source: ACSI)

Improving CX

53.7 sec.

The average speed with which calls to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services' contact center were answered in March 2022, down from 179.9 seconds in January 2022 (Source: CMS)

60%

of governments will integrate HCD techniques into their digital service design process by 2023. (Source: Gartner)

54%

of governments have deployed HCD, 20% of which are widely using it and 34% of which are in pilot. (Source: Gartner)

$100,000

The estimated savings per project using the U.S. Web Design System, a free, centralized tool for federal agencies to create websites (Source: 18F)

"We're working to design, build, and manage public service delivery through the moments that matter in peoples' lives – not our bureaucratic silos."

-*The Performance Management Agenda*

Agencies Risk Public Health, Trust by Ignoring End Users

The Challenge: Hasty Modernization Leaves End Users Out

The public relies on government health agencies all the time, but especially in times of stress or crisis, as the pandemic made clear. And yet, many agencies fell short when it came to providing services. Some services were entirely unavailable online. Of those that were available, many weren't mobile-accessible, and required a PC to access. Considering that smartphone ownership surpassed ownership of all other computing devices in 2018 and that about 15% of U.S. adults are "smartphone-only" internet users, many users could be boxed out of access. A system you can't reach is a system you won't trust.

"Agencies scrambled to rectify these problems, but that meant little time for research and development, resulting in hasty solutions to complex problems and designs that didn't always account for the end user," said Rita Breen, Director, Agile and Human-Centered Design Practices at Anthem.

Even in more ordinary times, health agencies don't fare much better. The typical IT modernization project faces budget, scheduling and interoperability challenges. Furthermore, when projects are eventually completed, they can deliver less value than initially projected. Poor implementation can frustrate end users, or fail to serve them entirely, and cause a range of problems for the agency, depending on the project's scope and complexity.

Inadequate execution then demands the reallocation of vital resources into reworking and away from innovation, Breen said. As a consequence, it disrupts operations and governance within the agency.

"Many of the challenges agencies face with IT modernization efforts result from a lack of communication between the health agency, IT department and end users," she said. "In too many cases, the people who rely on the deployed solutions are not consulted during the design process, which means solutions may not address their true needs." This pivotal oversight can result in subpar or even unusable products and services—and a loss in public confidence.

Government agencies' failure to improve CX not only threatens public health, but could fuel a continued decline in confidence and trust.

The Solution: Put End Users First, Communicate Often

HCD defines and solves problems from the perspective of the people who will eventually use the solutions, making it a critical component of any comprehensive CX initiative. It prioritizes the people who will depend on the result. Unfortunately, there is a common misconception that HCD practices add unnecessary time and cost to product management and Agile delivery processes.

It's true that HCD requires more work early in the initiative's lifecycle. But the time spent understanding the customer, building empathy and listening to users about real issues helps build better products that will require less troubleshooting and support in the long term, consistent with the larger goals of the Agile approach. "The extra upfront work of considering their needs and getting their input throughout the development lifecycle will pay dividends in the end," said Breen.

Communication and partnership are also essential to human-centered modernization. IT modernization can mean wildly different things to different people within an agency, so it's important to establish and communicate a mutual understanding of priorities and needs, throughout the organization and beyond. This requires a human-centric approach, Breen said, with public and private sector entities working together at all steps of the modernization journey to ensure a holistic experience for every individual, both inside and outside the agency.

Partnerships with other organizations are also crucial because they foster collaboration and can further enhance the total constituent experience through stronger interactions. Similarly, data-sharing and implementing interoperable solutions can help reduce silos in government, which improves both internal functioning and external service delivery.

Best Practices in Facilitating HCD

Human-centered design starts with asking a few basic questions:

> • Who is receiving the experience you are creating?

> • What do they need?

> • How are current solutions working?

Source: The Partnership for Public Service's Tech Talent for 21st Century Government

Like most things related to modernization, adopting HCD requires both soft and technical skills. After all, it's about change, and change is hard for many people, even when it's designed to help them. Breen highlighted five ways to center the human experience while advancing the technical design.

1. Empathize

Be attuned to the perspective, needs and limitations of end users. Incorporate that understanding into any platform redesign. View all decisions through a human lens.

2. Communicate

Listen to the voices and opinions of the user base. Develop solutions collaboratively.

3. Design for Accessibility

Account for cognitive impairment, limited dexterity, elevated anxiety, poor vision and any other impediments an end user may have to ensure that designs are equitable and accessible to all.

4. Ensure Usability and Simplicity

Prioritize functionality and intuitive designs. Clear instructions and straightforward navigation create a less confusing experience.

5. Leverage Feedback

Maintain feedback loops to consistently improve and refine services once they are publicly available.

"We will improve the experience of those [that] Government serves. … This focus on customer experience will not only improve the delivery, efficiency, security, and effectiveness of our government programs, it will advance equity and enhance everyday interactions with public services and uplift the lives of those who need it the most."

– President's Management Agenda

HOW NATIONAL GOVERNMENT SERVICES HELPS

By emphasizing and prioritizing Human-Centered Design (HCD) across the enterprise, National Government Services is more agile in solution delivery and improved user experiences that yield stronger insights and better outcomes for the millions of Americans served by federal health programs.

For instance, HCD was the cornerstone of the success of a recently launched provider portal that improved access to obtain beneficiary eligibility, claim status, and more for 400,000 health providers serving millions of beneficiaries of the Medicare program. Partnering with the provider community early often resulted in a product with vastly enhanced navigation and usability.

National Government Services has been a reliable and trusted partner to the federal government for more than 50 years, particularly supporting the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services through every significant milestone in Medicare since the program's inception.

Conclusion

"The fundamental principles of design—placing users at the center and building empathy to understand their needs—are proving to be uniquely suited for identifying and tackling some of the most complex problems in government and building trust and confidence in our institutions," said Kyla Fullenwider, the Census Bureau's first chief innovation officer.

An HCD approach to CX prioritizes the experience of the end user and uses actual feedback from the public in decision-making. By solving challenges from the perspective of those who ultimately depend on the solutions, the result is far more likely to be easy and intuitive to use. Each time someone engages with the government — and regardless of whether the task is mundane or vital — is an opportunity to improve (or damage) that person's trust in the federal government. HCD approaches to CX can overwhelmingly improve public faith in government, because they give citizens positive interactions with government services and efficient access to the resources they need.

ABOUT NATIONAL GOVERNMENT SERVICES

National Government Services makes transformation meaningful by empowering federal healthcare agencies to improve lives and communities. We design process for progress and bridge the technology gap to make IT an enabler of healthcare, not an obstacle to operations. We empower federal health agencies to deliver care to millions of Americans through outcome-driven innovation.

Learn more at ngsservices.com

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GovLoop's mission is to "connect government to improve government." We aim to inspire public-sector professionals by serving as the knowledge network for government. GovLoop connects more than 300,000 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 connect and improve government.

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