Keeping digital adoption moving forward

Four strategies help governments build on transformation momentum from 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated challenges motivated local governments to accelerate digital transformation to support remote work and online services for constituents. Many of these changes will remain for the long term, but leaders need to evaluate these new technologies and processes to make sure they continue to provide strong benefits and positive outcomes.

A key question is how a government can sustain its digital transformation efforts. In a Center for Digital Government (CDG) survey of 125 small and mid-sized local governments, respondents identified four strategies they will pursue. Read below to learn more.

Strategy #1: Obtain leadership support

Any technology initiative, especially one with an impact as broad as digital transformation, will not be successful without strong support from a government's executive leaders and elected officials. In a way, the pandemic helped create that support, as leaders saw the direct impact that new technology had on sustaining government services.

This positive leadership perception is likely to last. In the CDG survey, more than 90 percent of governments say digital transformation has been important since the pandemic began. However, leaders' criteria for technology investments will shift to consider its role in routine operations.

"The pandemic showed that digital services and digital capabilities are just as important as a government's accounting or tax systems," says Phil Bertolini, co-executive director of CDG. "Digital transformation will be a high priority for governments going forward."

To reinforce this priority, leaders will need to support fast decisions and deployment for new digital solutions, whether the impetus comes from urgent needs of a crisis or a goal to improve routine operations.

Alameda County, California, provides an example of how a government can act quickly on a new digital initiative. The county is one of many jurisdictions that adopted a cloud-based contact center solution early in the pandemic. Initially, this choice was essential to handle a 600 percent surge in call volumes and support a fully remote agent workforce. The cloud solution also allowed the county to eliminate the costs of an outsourced call center to handle peak demand periods.

Even in normal times, governments can experience seasonal or event-driven variations in call volumes. A scalable infrastructure can handle unpredictable demand levels with more efficiency and cost-effectiveness, which makes the case for maintaining some level of contact center resources in the cloud.

Strategy #2: Focus on constituent service delivery

Leadership support is often easiest to obtain when a new technology makes clear improvements to constituent services. During the pandemic, agencies needed to quickly shift many services online.

In Arizona, several local governments use a single online portal to help residents easily apply for federal relief assistance with rent, mortgage, and utility payments. The portal digitizes a previously paper-intense process, in part by allowing clients to upload photos of required documents. Optical character recognition (OCR) technology captures required data from the image, then verifies and transfers it to the application system — steps that reduce processing time and speed payment delivery to eligible recipients.

Looking ahead, contactless transactions and digital services will remain due to their efficiency and lower costs. In the CDG survey, 83 percent of governments expect to continue offering a high level of digital citizen services.

"Local governments will look at making digital investments in areas where the technology is part of a solution to larger problems in their community," says Bob Bennett, CDG senior fellow and former chief innovation officer for Kansas City, Missouri. "Those problems will likely not be defined by technology, but technology evolutions will absolutely be part of the solutions."

It's important to remember that digital services aren't always easy to access by those who need them most. Maintaining a high level of digital equity is vital to help constituents access services and opportunities for work, education, and healthcare.

Governments should plan to offer online portals and mobile apps but also consider expanded Wi-Fi coverage. Neighborhood kiosks are an important access resource for residents who don't have computers or smartphones. And some communities may benefit from multilingual volunteer or staff guides who can help with navigating digital resources.

Strategy #3: Maintain an innovation mindset

With the power, flexibility, and cost benefits of cloud technology available today, there's no need to wait for the next crisis to continue digital transformation. Government agencies can use this technology to deliver creative services that carry relatively low risk.

Baltimore applied this mindset by offering a new digital service to people experiencing homelessness: a secure online locker to store digital copies of essential documents. This service cuts down the time caseworkers spend helping clients replace documents required to determine program eligibility, services, and payments.

Also, look at how cloud and digital technologies can increase internal process efficiency. Begin with an exploratory program of trial projects to see what works and what lessons can be applied to a full deployment. Then, build upon these project successes incrementally to achieve steady improvements in business and operational processes.

"Most citizen services are tied to some operational process, so the operational benefits of improving technology through digital investments frequently improve citizen services as well," says Louis Carr, CDG senior fellow. "The two are not mutually exclusive; they can be complementary efforts."

Strategy #4: Continue to strengthen resiliency

How to become more resilient was likely the biggest lesson of the pandemic for governments. Applying resiliency capabilities will allow them to respond faster during a future crisis.

For this strategy, focus on maintaining five pillars of resiliency:
- Workforce enablement through continued technology and policy support for remote work
- Constituent engagement to meet expectations for digital services
- Business continuity that enables more efficient and impactful work across departments with common tools and data
- Real-time data analytics to quickly identify trends and respond to operational and community needs
- Business and process modernization that make disaster recovery easier and streamline normal operations

More transformation ahead

The COVID-19 pandemic sparked a profound journey of digital transformation for local governments. It can be easy to lose momentum for continued digital progress, especially when there's no crisis that needs an urgent response. By applying the four strategies presented here, local governments can sustain the digital transformation progress they have already made, then build upon it for even more improvements in operations and constituent services.

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