

Fast tracking transformation

Adapting to the new normal requires agility, innovation and listening to the user

Numerous agencies have been forced to fast track their digital transformation efforts since the pandemic hit earlier this year, requiring them to quickly and securely accommodate users working remotely.

Agencies will have to be agile and innovative so that they can adapt to the changing needs of their employees and better support their mission.

For the Department of State, this meant moving its 110,000 users into a nearly full-time telework situation within two weeks, said Brian Merrick, deputy director, at the Department of State's Cloud Program Management Office.

This effort underscored the fact that "the mission driver to provide better data, to provide better decision support to senior management has driven a lot of the innovation we've been working on," Merrick said.

The department used a software-as-a-service toolset to capture different data elements that previously were picked manually and aggregate them into clean datasets and databases that could be used by senior management to make decisions.

"What this has done is focused the business and programmatic side of the department to see data as a transformational asset, and to really find a different way to approach work," he said.

By supporting cloud computing, the department has been able to provide access to its employees, regardless of where they are working, offer capabilities at scale, and speed the decision-making process.

"This is going to be a new way of thinking about how the business interacts with technology and how we better inform senior management and make better decisions in all the programmatic efforts across the agency," Merrick said.

Digital transformation was a catalyst in transforming the National Science Foundation into an agile organization, which has enabled the agency to adapt quickly to the demands of employees working from home.

"We have created an infrastructure that is telework ready," said Chezian Sivagnanam, chief enterprise architect, at the NSF.

The NSF's digital transformation plan focuses on four main areas: technology modernization, data as a strategic asset, a digitally empowered workforce, and agile governance, he said.

The goal is to reduce bottlenecks within the agency that may slow down the decision making process. "We want that to be more agile, so we are creating a framework for people to make quicker decisions," Sivagnanam said.

New normal

Organizations will have to learn to adapt to this new normal, which means being agile and innovative in order to deliver services to their employees in a timely manner, said Kevin Guay, database engineer for Affigent.

"In this new normal being innovative also means that we also have to think on our feet very quickly," he said.

This includes following design thinking principles, and keeping the



lines of communication open among all stakeholders "to make sure everybody understands where we are in the journey in achieving those mission objectives," Guay said.

This approach is especially important as agencies determine what technology and projects to adopt. Smaller teams of employees can provide constant feedback and will help agencies make better investment decisions, he said.

"Leverage technology for the right things and be able to empower the teams to make those decisions to deliver on the mission objectives," Guay said.

Keeping the lines of communication open helped the State Department roll out 10 new applications in two weeks. The undersecretary for management helped coalesce the stakeholders, data owners and process owners to drive priorities and get buy-in, Merrick said.

Some of the building blocks already were in place to implement telework on a large scale, such as cloud-based authentication, but the department had to rethink its application layer and identify key applications that needed to be accessed remotely.

"This is refocusing the overarching needs of our customers to be able to access key capabilities to do their work remotely," Merrick said.

The next challenge will be accommodating a mix of employees who will move back to the office using on-premises technology and those still working from home via the cloud.

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“As people start to come back into more face-to-face meetings we don’t want them to go back to printing up briefing decks on pieces of paper when half the group in the meeting is off site,” Merrick said. “We want to be able to share that information virtually.”

The NSF also had much of the building blocks in place to handle the switch to teleworking. It was one of the first agencies to migrate to the cloud in 2012 and already had issued laptops to its employees with remote collaboration capabilities and had moved most services to a multi-cloud architecture.

Priorities at the agency such as resilience, an integrated IT governance structure, digital transformation, and agile decision making helped prep the NSF for offering 100% telework, Sivagnanam said.

“The goal for us is to really focus on the sentiments of the customer

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– BRIAN MERRICK, DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF THE CLOUD PROGRAM MANAGEMENT OFFICE AT THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE.

and the staff and adjust our plans accordingly and be agile and nimble so we can really react to the situation as it comes,” he said. “Keep working and see this as an opportunity to take this further.”

Agencies should make any changes in small chunks rather than trying

to “boil the ocean,” Guay said. They should brainstorm and come up with creative solutions based on user and stakeholder input.

Using intelligent automation, artificial intelligence, a strong governance framework, and a proactive approach to cybersecurity, can help ensure users have the right tools at the right time in order to do their jobs.

“Digital transformation is not just about the technology,” Guay said. “It’s about the people and how you are going to make their lives easier and their jobs better so they can deliver on the mission objectives of the agency.”

It can be difficult to change the culture and innovate when an agency has already made a huge investment in its IT. And sometimes things won’t go as planned. “You have to be willing to make mistakes. You have to be willing to take that risk,” Merrick said.

Transformation, innovation depends on leadership

Transformational leaders understand the culture, people and mission of their organization and view challenges as opportunities to try something new and innovative.

When the Department of Energy drafted its vision statement, it wanted to establish goals, set expectations, and deliver mission success through innovation and transformation.

However, transformation can only happen if leaders understand the culture and climate of the organization they are working in, so they can influence the workforce and help them succeed.

“Without influence you’re not going to be able to transform,” said Pamela Isom, deputy chief information officer for architecture, engineering, technology and innovation, at DOE.

Leaders have to take risks, embrace innovation, and always have a back-up plan. “If you want to be a transformational leader, you have to be courageous. You have to be willing to take risks. You have to be bold,” Isom said. “You don’t mind the challenges because you can deal with them.”

Transformational leaders also have to be genuine, authentic and patient with their employees because “things are not going to happen overnight,” she said.

They also have to “hear to understand,” care about the mission and focus on the innovations that matter.

At DOE, this included establishing an Innovation Community Center to help program offices share new and innovative ideas and capabilities across the department, Isom said. The center helps agencies discover how to “do things better in a safe space.”

The center has three main focuses: innovation exchange; market research for new, emerging and advanced technologies; and sandboxes to advance these capabilities.

Another initiative is an artificial intelligence innovation exchange to help show where AI initiatives are happening across the department. This includes a new application that helps first responders fight wildfires by combining AI and geospatial data.

New applications should not be developed in isolation, Isom said. Stakeholders must be involved from the start so their needs are met and they can contribute to the mission.

“If you don’t understand the people...if you’re coming across as insincere, you’re not going to go anywhere with your transformation,” she said. “You’re going to have innovation that’s not used and that won’t matter to the mission spaces.”

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