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A successful transformation effort keeps the customer at the center

BY JASON MILLER

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission held a “jam.”

The Education Department organized wide-ranging conversations with every office that focused on cost savings, avoidance and performance.

The Commerce Department’s International Trade Administration is going next level with a digital and customer strategy.

Transformation in the government is a lot like ice cream, no matter what flavor you choose, if it’s done well, it hits the right spot.

“From an agency transformation perspective, people are taking a look at their mission and vision, and outcomes and [asking themselves] are they achieving them,” said Roberta Mourão, a principal with Ernst & Young LLP Government and Public Sector during a roundtable discussion. “How do you start on the transformation journey to make changes around three areas: workforce, infrastructure and business processes?”

It’s clear that every agency is starting somewhere on the continuum of transformation.

But no matter where agencies are in this never-ending journey, there are certain stops along the way.

For many agencies, a key path on this transformation journey is on the customer-centric highway.

PANEL OF EXPERTS



Scott Bowman, Acting Deputy Chief Information Officer, Federal Emergency Management Agency



Jeff Bristow, Principal, Government and Public Sector, Ernst & Young LLP



Rona Bunn, Acting Chief Information Officer, International Trade Administration



Doug Freeman, Director, Office of Digital Strategy and Engagement, International Trade Administration



Jason Gray, Chief Information Officer, Department of Education



Jamie Holcombe, Chief Information Officer, United States Patent and Trademark Office



Roberta Mourão, Principal, Government and Public Sector, Ernst & Young LLP



David Nelson, Chief Information Officer, Nuclear Regulatory Commission



Start by listening

David Nelson, the NRC chief information officer, said this is why his agency's "jam" was so important. These events included every employee, NRC commissioners as well, and had a heavy online presence with podcasts and other internal communications.

"We had all of our employees participating in conversations around those topics ... trying to understand the things that would make the most difference for the agency in any of the scenarios, as well as identifying the sign posts or markers that could tell us where we're going," Nelson said. "From my perspective, the CIO needs to be part of the strategy for the agency, but also ends up supporting all of those initiatives. We're heavily involved in the first wave of initiatives at this point."

At the Education Department, Jason Gray, the agency's CIO, said before even getting his transformation bus on the customer-centric highway, he had to address the underlying infrastructure.

Education spent the last few years modernizing its network and technology like the laptops employees use every day.

"The idea was to modernize in a way that we could transition. We had to revamp our entire governance process because it doesn't matter if we just improved the technology or if we improved the culture if we don't reshape the way that we're governing," Gray said. "We started with just an inventory [of our technology and applications] and an assessment, which was literally meeting with the stakeholders, system owners and the business units. Then we hired a consultant to talk about the potential 'to-be' environment, but that

was more notional. We actually set up information and listening sessions. We did town halls to to receive feedback and input. We had over 300 individual meetings, I met with every single principal office and assistant secretary to talk about a modernization plan."

The feedback and input helped create support and eased concerns about the changes coming for Education employees, Gray said.

Constant state of transforming

Jamie Holcombe, the CIO at the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, knows firsthand about how transformational efforts can be "scary" for employees.

But, he said he subscribes to the idea that organizations, federal or otherwise, have to transform every five years. This doesn't let people get too comfortable with the current set of tools or business processes.

"It's winning the hearts and minds. [In order to] transform the examiners into the new world and give them new tools, [it means] convincing them that these new search tools that we're providing are actually better for them, [they] will help them in the time it takes between application signing and awarding of patent," Holcombe said. "The trademark side is a lot quicker. But we have to give them better tools so they could have fraudulent specimens identified faster and sooner, rather than relying on the old tools."

Holcombe said for many organizations transforming people and tools can be hard, but it's the processes in which the biggest opportunities exist.



"I'm concentrating mostly on the infrastructure. We're moving to the cloud and that transformation [creates] a lot of fear in people," he said. "We have to do it right, and that means the cost [and security] models need to be there. A lot of people are just throwing things into the cloud, [and] they don't understand their ingress and egress with their data models. It costs a lot to transfer a lot of data. We have 19 petabytes of data that we need to transform, or transfer around. We're not going to do that every day, and therefore we have to pick and choose how we do our cloud transformation very carefully."

Paint a picture of the customer

Rona Bunn, the acting CIO at ITA, said her agency moved to the cloud several years ago and now is ready to drill down to customer needs because the technology can't—and shouldn't—outpace organizational change.

Doug Freeman, the director of the Office of Digital Strategy and Engagement at ITA, said the goal of any transformation is to ensure employees understand why their job or their mission area will benefit.

"We paint a picture to get them focused on the customer, then show how a digital transformation can work, then observe from a data perspective unemotionally - literally what the customers are telling you about what they want, what their preferences are - and then [design] the ability to react to that in real time to create dynamic experiences," Freeman said. "The more they do that, the more it connects back to their goals as an office and as an organization."

He said as employees see their work making a difference, they are more satisfied and driven to meet their goals. At the same time, ITA's customers also are happier with the service they are receiving.

"There's been a lot of technology work and bringing in whole new marketing technology stacks – what we can see from an analytics perspective, what we can do from the experimentation, optimization perspective. That's really the easier part, believe it or not. The harder part is the people," Freeman said.

Panelists agreed transformation almost always is about the people.

Jeff Bristow, principal with EY Government and Public Sector, said he's spent a lot of time in "jams" or, as he called them, "rumbles" where you are trying to get people to break out of their own cliques and understand there is an end goal everyone wants to reach.

"There's a lot of power in making sure everyone recognizes their voice is being heard. One of the most important things is to understand that transformation is not like a traditional approach where you have a destination in three years. Because by the time three years happens, the needs of your customers, the needs your people, they're going to move on," he said. "It's about making a cultural shift and a mindset shift. It's more about the ability to adapt and respond to the needs of your constituents or your employees. That is the key."



Governance still matters

At FEMA, employees are in a constant state of adaptation in order to deal with disasters, whether it's hurricanes or wild fires or flooding.

That also means FEMA's technology must find a way to constantly evolve.

Scott Bowman, FEMA's deputy CIO, said the agency recently re-established its IT governance board with senior leaders from across the mission and back-office areas.

"We're focused on partnering with the customers throughout the organization. Obviously, we have the traditional CIO role to ensure that we have a secure infrastructure, ensuring that all of our users have access to the data they need when they need it and that it's secure," Bowman said. "One of the things we're trying to do to deliver services faster is moving our applications to a dev/sec/ops model - moving that security more to the left, putting more things in the cloud, and then consolidating what we have in the cloud."

Like FEMA, other agencies reestablished governance boards with a stronger mission or customer voice as a way to drive transformation.

ITA's Freeman said having that alignment between IT and mission opens the door to better, faster and more successful change.

USPTO's Holcombe said the trademark office created six different customer avatars to represent the demographics of someone applying for a trademark.

"This is more about how the behavior works than just the identity," he said. "There's a lot of entrepreneurs and innovators who don't behave like the large corporations [typically do] when applying

for patents. Trademarks is another altogether different way that people actually feel empowered just to register a trademark, which is great."

Creating trust, alignment matters

And at the Education Department, Gray said his office is reaching out to non-governmental organizations to get direct feedback on systems and applications.

"I was speaking with one organization and the feedback was a concern about what the department's guidance is going to be. So my question is, 'How can we shape the guidance to help you?' In numerous instances, people are talking about the financial constraints that the institutions have," he said. "It's really more of a collaborative discussion with the consumers of the data."

In the end, the panelists agreed that transformation may start by taking a customer-centric view, but it thrives by creating trust across the agency and the clients.

"Are the employees aligned to the citizens' outcomes so they can see for themselves how they're achieving the things you talked about, from leadership to alignment with the business to technology?" EY's Roberta Mourão said. "I work a lot with the business and the mission side and we hear often that they just want to do it themselves or they just want to do this pilot. But, you will never go anywhere if you don't align with your broader stakeholders and you don't measure program success against the aligned goals. Many agencies in the mission side have seen their pilots never go anywhere, which erodes confidence with the employees. It just disengages with the alignment they are trying to set up." 