

Improved Citizen Services through DevSecOps Maturation

Summary of Roundtable, hosted by ATARC in July 2022

WHITE PAPER

The American public has come to demand a faster, easier, and more efficient methods of access to Government services. The evolving landscape of technology, security, and data availability is pushing the Government to build citizen service applications and services with high quality and security built-in at the core.

While developers have long used the DevOps model to develop, deploy, and update applications, the modern threat scene requires that security be as tightly integrated into the application as the development and operations components.

DevOps vs. DevSecOps

DevOps: Development and Operations – the two teams collaborate on processes, KPIs, and milestones and focus on small, iterative updates. Security teams play a role, but not continuously, and often as an afterthought.

DevSecOps: A security team is integrated into the process and works with the development team to mitigate security vulnerabilities continuously during coding, rather than just at the end.

ATARC recently hosted a roundtable to discuss how Government agencies can improve delivery of citizen services using DevSecOps best practices. Participants in the roundtable discussed this through the lens of industry trends such as Value Stream Management and software factories. They also discussed how the Executive Order 14058 is transforming the federal customer

experience and service delivery to rebuild trust in government.

Focusing on the Constituent

Citizen services are the public face of our government in action. They provide an essential link between the government and the constituent, ensuring public access to their citizen benefits.

Unlike the past times of having to show up at a local branch office or pick up the phone, citizens can now access many services online. This dictates a heightened focus on digital services. While the government has traditionally lagged in this area, panelists agreed that there has been progress. Some agencies have conducted studies to better understand the end user, while others have opted to offer volumes of data for viewers to analyze as they see fit.

Participants advised IT leaders to approach both updating old and building new apps from a usability perspective. Today's end user expects to find information quickly and presented in a logical structure. It is highly recommended to seek direct feedback on their needs and wishes.

Similar guidance is presented in Executive Order 14058, *Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government*. However, even if the EO does not directly name an agency, constituents and customer experience should still be prioritized in any development decisions.

Lessons Learned, More Challenges Ahead

Participants repeatedly cited the lack of knowledge about their user base as one of their biggest challenges, often resulting in applications or services that were difficult to

navigate. Leading with the constituent needs as a central focus and testing it with real-world users is a must.

Other panelists found portions of the Federal bureaucracy obstructive. Decisions are delayed by having to go through multiple “checks”. Longer-term planning is complicated by the chaotic nature of the budgeting process. Additional pain points included data and workflow ownership issues, and debates between outsourcing versus in-house development.

Best Practice Recommendations

Participants recommended adopting the following strategies in citizen service app development:

- ❖ Seek end-user feedback
- ❖ Leverage Value Stream Management concepts
- ❖ Make data driven decisions
- ❖ Aim to provide regular (even if incomplete) updates sustain public trust
- ❖ Utilize private sector partnerships

In development, participants recognized success in using software factories, as well as implementing concepts of value stream management to identify and root out inefficiencies. They recommended delivering regular small iterative updates and leveraging the learning aspect of agile development through regular in-person or virtual meetings. Roundtable attendees also stressed that any decisions made towards improving development processes should be data driven. There is much to be learned from the data alone – some participants did admit that their agencies had not done a good job of this in the past.

Technology by nature moves very fast and keeping up is tough. The transition from DevOps to DevSecOps and the accompanying changes, whether triggered by internal

efforts or Federal mandates, make adjusting even more challenging.

Finally, some agencies are hit hard by the Great Resignation. One participant noted that they had lost two critical employees in a week to the private sector for significantly more compensation. The Federal Government finds itself increasingly unable to compete with industry in talent acquisition.

Complying with Executive Order 14058

Executive Order 14058 aims to address the many bottlenecks constituents experience when interacting with Federal Government agencies. It directs select agencies to work on the usability and customer experience across most accessed public services.

While complying with EO 14058 is a challenge, participants agreed there is a valid need for this guidance. Throughout the EO, President Biden refers to a “time tax,” the time citizens lose while waiting for an agency response to requests for assistance or benefits they are entitled to.

The Biden Administration drew a straight line from government inefficiency to erosion of public trust in its reasoning for EO 14058. If constituents are not being well-served, they lose confidence in the institution’s ability to fulfill their needs. However, staffing issues also contribute to inadequate levels of customer service and delayed responses. In some cases, agencies are faced with complex queries that require legal, sensitivity, or other additional reviews, which can further prolong the resolution.

To combat this, participants recommended to start, at a minimum, with an immediate answer and indication of expected timeline for a complete response. This can be accomplished by using a customer relationship management (CRM) software, for example.

Contact us today to learn more and get involved in ATARC’s [DevOps Working Groups!](#)