

# Adapting to Change: Evolving Government in the Digital Age

Highlights from a government roundtable, hosted by ATARC, in partnership with INDR, June 2023

Government IT is in the midst of a rapid evolution. As technology accelerates and constituent demands increase, agencies face multifaceted challenges, including rapidly changing technology and an increased threat of cyber attacks.

In a recent roundtable discussion hosted by the Advanced Technology Academic Research Center (ATARC) in partnership with Indr, a digital transformation SaaS platform, panelists representing various federal agencies discussed the opportunities and challenges facing government agencies in this era of transformation.

## Pandemic Acceleration

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered how government agencies operate—from where work is conducted to how agencies deliver services to the public. Many agencies embraced the seemingly overnight transition to remote work as an opportunity to reexamine and improve processes.

Some agencies were already well-positioned for telework before the pandemic, but field offices around the world rapidly undertook many adjustments to modernize. Some agencies updated their web properties with customer-centric software, improving navigation and data access for internal and external stakeholders. Other panelists shared that the pandemic led to an increased focus on cloud migrations, Zero Trust architecture, and a clearer future direction for the department.

**“One might argue that we have made lemonade out of lemons, and that it actually resulted in a better and clear future for our direction as an IT organization.”**

Balancing the need for operational continuity with security remains a top priority for all panelists. Remote work is here to stay, but the increased number of endpoints opens more opportunities for threat actors. One panelist noted that as agencies modernize, it’s critical to not only consider Zero Trust from a system-to-system standpoint, but also within the system by examining how components and subsystems interact. This facilitates secure interactions when citizens access government services electronically.

Beyond the technological aspects, the cultural component of transitioning to remote work has influenced employees and stakeholders alike. One panelist emphasized the importance of the customer experience as agencies continue to modernize—suggesting that while selecting the right technology is crucial, fostering the right culture and customer-focused approach is equally—if not more—important. Technology, they argue, should be adjusted to meet the needs of the users, rather than the other way around.

Overall, panelists view the transition to remote work as a positive experience that accelerated government technology modernization.

## Focus on CX

Panelists agree that in today's digital age, providing excellent customer experience is crucial. As one panelist noted, the rapidly evolving digital landscape increases pressure on the government to update customer interfaces. Many agencies are focusing efforts on collaboratively developing a unified customer experience to avoid creating numerous disparate customer experience strategies for each agency.

**“Disruption is the new normal”**

Some agencies are shifting investment from infrastructure to application layers to improve customer interfaces across government departments. They are consistently improving and optimizing design from a user-centered approach by observing website metrics and surveying users to understand their needs and preferences.

Other panelists emphasized the challenges of integrating customer experience alongside the implementation of Zero Trust, which requires multi-factor authentication and increased security measures among agencies, websites, and applications. As interfaces standardize, agencies must ensure their Zero Trust principles cater to everyone equitably and fairly, adding another layer of complexity to the user experience.

While Zero Trust poses challenges, the ultimate goal remains to provide excellent customer experiences, serving users' needs without causing frustration. Successfully balancing customer experience with security requires resources, careful budgeting, and streamlined access to information across all platforms.

The adoption of human-centered design is also a key element in digital transformation for many agencies. This approach involves the human perspective in all steps of the problem-solving process, ensuring people find the digital environment intuitive and relevant to their needs. New technologies, such as generative artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning models, are accelerating and refining the development of a user-centric experience.

**"We have to have a mindset of having economies of scale in order to accelerate our overall technology."**

## Integration of AI and New Tools

Panelists discussed the immense potential of AI and machine learning as a tool for human progress. However, some panelists raised caution about the potential dangers of AI, including the low barrier to entry, which could enable rogue actors to use these technologies for malicious purposes.

Panelists emphasized the need for careful oversight and ethical considerations in the advancement of AI technology, balancing its potential benefits with potential threats. Other participants highlighted the crucial role of education and proposed AI should be a compulsory subject for students.

**"We have to be very careful about how we do this, and do this with eyes wide open, because the ethics and philosophical implications are stacked at the start. Let's try to reap the good, but let's also keep a very, very close eye on the bad."**

While concerns surround open source AI, panelists note that AI technology has actually existed for decades. AI has evolved from simple natural language processors to the sophisticated systems we see today. Panelists likened the ubiquity of AI to that of garage door openers, emphasizing its growing importance in our lives. Panelists stressed the potential of pairing generative AI and human-centered design to make technology more effective and user-friendly.

Panelists also expressed concern about the concentration of AI technology and resources in just a few organizations, citing Google and OpenAI as significant leaders in the field. Such dominance could hinder the development of other organizations due to the substantial resources required to create large language models.

The open-sourcing of AI brings with it a blend of prospective benefits and threats, including the risk of malevolent AI technology. Despite these threats, panelists argue the evolution of technology offers immense possibilities for the betterment of society. They stress the need for proactive research of emerging technologies to ensure AI technology continues to benefit the public.

## Final Thoughts

**"It's important that we leverage this moment in time over the next three to four years where there's additional funding to substantially transform the way we do business. This cannot be incremental."**

Participants acknowledge that large-scale adverse events, like the SolarWinds hack and the pandemic, have catalyzed profound and lasting changes within government. For instance, the breach highlighted previously overlooked vulnerabilities in the supply chain and accelerated the shift towards Zero Trust architecture.

Panelists argue agencies should seize this moment to fundamentally transform how business is done, rather than fall back on incremental changes. With federal funding readily available, panelists encourage agencies to act now to overhaul systems and drive innovation. Now is the time for legacy systems to be discarded and for entire technology stacks to be reengineered with a Zero Trust architecture. A failure to seize this opportunity, they argue, would be a significant setback for agencies and citizens.

**"That's the key focus. How do you transform technology into making it more accessible, easier to use, more fair, and more transparent, so that people can see what their government's doing, what decisions they're making, and how can they get better involved."**

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