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AI Workflows for Government: Turning Data into Mission Impact

A Federal Practitioner Roundtable
White Paper (Chatham House Rules)

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Executive Summary

Federal agencies are at a pivotal moment in their adoption of artificial intelligence. While interest and experimentation have accelerated rapidly, practitioners across government are confronting a shared reality: the true challenge is not access to AI, but the ability to operationalize data and integrate AI into mission workflows.

Across agencies, leaders are navigating flat budgets, workforce constraints, and fragmented data environments. In this context, AI is emerging not as a standalone capability, but as a force multiplier—one that enhances productivity, accelerates decision-making, and improves service delivery when properly embedded into operations.

The conversation reflects a shift from experimentation to execution. Agencies are moving beyond pilots toward mission-scale deployment, with success increasingly defined by measurable impact rather than technical implementation.

1. Moving Beyond the AI Hype Cycle

Federal agencies have rapidly deployed AI tools, particularly generative AI capabilities such as chatbots and copilots. However, early adoption has revealed that technology alone does not deliver value.

Generic AI tools, when disconnected from mission data and workflows, offer limited utility. Agencies are finding that while AI models are powerful, their effectiveness depends entirely on the quality, accessibility, and relevance of underlying data.

The current phase of adoption is less about proving that AI works, and more about ensuring that it delivers meaningful outcomes. This transition is forcing agencies to confront foundational challenges that predate AI, including data fragmentation, legacy systems, and organizational silos.

2. Data as the Foundation of AI Success

Across all participants, there was strong alignment that data is the central constraint in scaling AI.

Most agencies operate in highly distributed environments, with data spread across bureaus, systems, and decades of accumulated infrastructure. This fragmentation limits the ability to apply AI consistently or effectively across the enterprise.

Efforts are underway to address this through enterprise data strategies, including the creation of data lakes, lakehouses, and shared data environments. These approaches aim to balance centralized access with local control, allowing mission owners to maintain autonomy while enabling broader integration.

However, progress remains uneven. Data maturity varies significantly across agencies and even within departments, creating challenges in standardization, governance, and interoperability.

3. From Pilot Programs to Mission Impact

The federal government has moved quickly to pilot AI solutions, but the challenge now is scaling those solutions to deliver sustained mission impact.

Successful approaches follow a consistent pattern: identify a high-value use case, demonstrate measurable improvement, and then expand that capability across similar functions.

In practice, AI has shown the greatest value in compressing time-intensive processes. In one example, a regulatory review workflow that previously required months of manual effort was reduced to a matter of weeks by using AI to categorize, deduplicate, and prioritize inputs.

These outcomes highlight that AI's value is not theoretical—it is operational. The ability to reduce cycle times, increase throughput, and improve accuracy directly translates into better mission performance.

4. AI as a Workflow Enabler

A defining theme across the discussion was that AI delivers the most value when embedded into workflows rather than deployed as a standalone tool.

High-impact applications are emerging in areas such as procurement, legal review, regulatory analysis, and data processing. These are functions characterized by high volume, repetitive tasks, and significant human effort.

By integrating AI into these workflows, agencies are enabling personnel to focus on higher-value activities while automating routine processes. This is particularly important in an environment where workforce capacity is constrained.

The shift is not about replacing people, but about augmenting their capabilities—allowing fewer resources to accomplish more.

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5. Legacy Systems and Technical Debt

Legacy infrastructure continues to be one of the most significant barriers to AI adoption.

Many agencies rely on systems that are decades old, limiting their ability to process data efficiently or integrate modern technologies. While cloud adoption is advancing, it is often uneven and constrained by mission requirements and existing investments.

Modernization is not optional. AI capabilities depend on scalable compute, accessible data, and flexible architectures. However, agencies face the difficult task of modernizing systems while maintaining ongoing operations.

This creates a dual burden: sustaining legacy environments while building future capabilities. Addressing technical debt is essential, but it must be done in a way that does not disrupt mission delivery.

6. Operating Under Resource Constraints

Resource constraints are a defining feature of the current environment.

Agencies are managing flat or declining budgets, reduced staffing levels, and increasing mission demands. In many cases, the limiting factor is not funding itself, but the ability to execute—driven by constraints in hiring, procurement, and organizational capacity.

AI is increasingly viewed as a way to offset these limitations. By improving efficiency and reducing manual effort, it allows agencies to maintain or even expand capabilities without corresponding increases in resources.

However, realizing these benefits requires intentional design. AI must be applied to the right problems, with clear alignment to mission priorities.

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7. Governance and Prioritization

As AI adoption expands, agencies are placing greater emphasis on governance and prioritization.

With limited resources, not every use case can be pursued. Leaders are adopting more structured approaches to decision-making, focusing on risk, mission impact, and return on investment.

This includes evaluating where AI can deliver the greatest value, as well as where risks—such as security, data integrity, or compliance—require additional oversight.

The result is a more disciplined approach to AI, one that balances innovation with accountability.

8. Measuring Mission Impact

One of the most persistent challenges is the lack of meaningful metrics.

Traditional measures often focus on spending or activity rather than outcomes. This creates a disconnect between investment and impact, making it difficult to assess the true value of AI initiatives.

Agencies are beginning to shift toward metrics that reflect mission performance, including productivity gains, reduced processing times, and improved service delivery.

This evolution is critical. Without clear measures of success, it is difficult to justify continued investment or scale successful initiatives.

9. Cultural and Organizational Change

Technology alone will not drive transformation. Organizational culture and incentives play a significant role in determining the success of AI initiatives.

Many agencies operate within structures that were not designed for rapid innovation. Budget processes, compliance requirements, and organizational silos can all act as barriers to change.

In some cases, existing incentives discourage efficiency, reinforcing legacy approaches rather than encouraging modernization.

Overcoming these challenges requires leadership, alignment, and a willingness to rethink traditional practices. Engaging the workforce, particularly those closest to mission execution, is essential to identifying opportunities and driving adoption.

10. The Path Forward

The path forward for AI in government is becoming clearer.

Success will depend on a set of core principles:

- Align AI initiatives directly with mission outcomes
- Invest in data as a foundational capability
- Focus on workflow integration rather than standalone tools
- Scale proven solutions across the enterprise
- Modernize infrastructure in parallel with innovation
- Establish meaningful metrics to measure impact
- Empower the workforce to adopt and adapt new technologies

AI is no longer an emerging capability. It is a practical tool for improving how government operates. The challenge now is to apply it in ways that are scalable, sustainable, and aligned with mission needs.

Conclusion

Federal agencies are transitioning from experimentation to execution in their use of artificial intelligence.

The focus is shifting from what AI can do to how it can improve mission outcomes. This requires a deeper integration of technology, data, and workflows, as well as changes in how agencies prioritize, measure, and manage innovation.

Those that succeed will be the ones that move beyond pilots, address foundational challenges, and apply AI in ways that deliver tangible results.

AI has the potential to significantly enhance government performance. Realizing that potential will depend on disciplined execution, strategic alignment, and a continued focus on mission impact.

About This Report

This white paper reflects insights from a federal practitioner roundtable conducted under Chatham House Rules. The perspectives presented are intended to capture shared themes and lessons learned across agencies, without attribution to specific individuals or organizations.