

Taking the Mystery Out of Customer Experience

A guide to improving interactions between citizens and government



PUBLIC SECTOR | FEDERAL HEALTH & CIVILIAN

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It takes about five clicks to buy something online. Sometimes less, it's so simple. We expect this ease across all interactions, including with government agencies. As citizens, we must interface with the government for essential services such as federal loans, social security and disaster assistance. When it's challenging to find information on these services, or the process to access them is too complex and time-consuming, it creates a frustrating customer experience (CX).

“Federal service delivery has not kept pace with the needs and expectations of the public. The American people deserve a government that puts people at the center of everything it does.”³

— Clare Martorana, Federal Chief Information Officer and TMF Board Chair

Commit to CX improvements

Federal agencies continue to fall behind the private sector in CX. According to Forrester, while agencies improved their collective CX scores in 2021, their average score of 62.6 out of 100 is still 10.7 points behind the private sector average, and the quality of federal CX varies widely for different demographic groups.¹ The Executive Order on Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government, issued in December 2021, aims to improve government agencies’ ability to provide services more equitably, effectively and in a way that people of all abilities can navigate. It instructs 17 federal agencies to commit to CX improvements, spanning everything from reducing the need for physical forms to providing more digital customer support channels, in 36 specific citizen-facing systems to rebuild trust in the federal government.²

To help agencies successfully implement these improvements, \$100 million of the Technology Modernization Fund (TMF) will be reserved to help streamline digital services to create a better CX for the American people. The TMF will prioritize projects that span agencies and reduce obstacles such as wait times and paperwork. All federal agencies and high-impact service providers can apply for this funding.³

The government can and must upgrade service delivery to serve citizens effectively and keep up with changing CX expectations, and the funding is available to support agency initiatives. However, some agencies may be unsure where to begin improving the citizen experience. That’s why we’ve created a guide to improving customer experience, featuring common strategies for enhancing CX, CX tools and the importance of building trust in new service delivery systems.

Focus on the citizen experience

Resolve website mazes

Prevent puzzling application processes

Decipher complex record systems

Focus on the citizen experience

Often, government agencies need to improve multiple aspects of CX, including web portal access, application processes and customer support features. These improvements may link to other IT initiatives, such as infrastructure modernization or strengthening cybersecurity, which makes it difficult to know where to start. But agencies must put citizens at the forefront to ensure CX best practices get folded into other initiatives. The executive order on CX mandates that many federal agencies update websites, application processes and record systems. To accomplish this, agencies need to understand how citizens interface with these tools to make the necessary adjustments and create more positive interactions. Federal agencies should conduct journey mapping, rapid prototyping, usability studies and A/B testing to understand how citizens interact with the systems and determine their challenges.

Agencies can work with a trusted industry partner to conduct interviews with citizens and develop citizen personas, and then run usability tests and analyze the results to determine what improvements would have the greatest impact on CX. The insights gathered from usability studies can also be used to help justify projects when applying for the designated CX funds

from the TMF. Agencies should prioritize “technology teams and systems that are capable of rapidly designing, prototyping and deploying modern digital tools and services based on human-centered design.”³ Projects selected to receive TMF funds must be supported by customer research and data, and agencies must be able to rapidly prototype them to meet the measurable goals that determine success. This will help government agencies develop and plan their CX objectives and initiatives.

While each agency needs to determine how to improve CX across its tools and systems, all agencies should consider common strategies for improving CX. These include using human-centered design to improve website navigation, streamlining application processes and improving the accessibility of record-keeping systems.



Resolve website mazes

An accessible, engaging website or mobile application can make the difference between a positive experience and a frustrating one. Citizens want to find the information they need quickly, whether it's public health information, weather warnings or financial aid. Typically, this means first checking an agency's website. If the site requires citizens to click through multiple pages and lacks a simplified search function, then citizens may become frustrated by the significant amount of time spent looking through those pages. They may not even find the information they want. Using human-centered design to build a website that's easy to navigate avoids this problem.

Agencies should conduct a usability study to see which aspects of their website should be modernized to improve CX. The study may reveal a need to consolidate disparate sites and reduce the number of clicks it takes to find information. It may also highlight the benefits of adding a simple search function so citizens can find the information they need quickly and easily or including a help feature that enables citizens to ask questions and troubleshoot if they have difficulty navigating the website. Many user-friendly websites incorporate an artificial intelligence chatbot that citizens can ask a simple question about what they're looking for, and the bot quickly returns the answer. Chatbots also offer 24-hour support, which can save government agencies money by reducing the need for overnight staff support.⁵

Consistency across multiple channels creates seamless CX and builds trust. Agencies must deliver information to citizens promptly and effectively, regardless of whether they use a computer or a mobile device. The information must also be current across all channels to increase accessibility and reduce confusion.⁶

Agencies must ensure websites comply with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act and are accessible for users with disabilities, including citizens and employees. A recent study by the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation found that of the 72 federal websites tested, 30% didn't pass the automated accessibility test for their home page and 48% failed the test on at least one of their three most popular webpages.⁷ Federal agencies can use accessible-design principles such as high contrast colors, text alternatives to audio and visual content, and labels for buttons to improve accessibility. Redesigning federal websites to be more accessible enables people with disabilities to navigate the website and helps all citizens navigate the site more easily.

Additionally, government agencies must make sure they can scale to accommodate surges in web traffic. If the number of visitors overwhelms a government website, it may result in slowdowns or crashes, which creates a stressful experience. Following the announcement on student loan forgiveness, traffic to the Federal Student Aid website, StudentAid.gov,

surged more than 500%. The website experienced outages and login errors and had to implement measures such as waiting rooms to accommodate the volume of web traffic.⁸ Ensuring website scalability can prevent these outages, so citizens don't struggle to access the information and services they need, and it provides a positive experience rather than a frustrating one.

In 2020, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) worked with NTT DATA to apply human-centered design best practices to the design and development of the Vaccine Adjuvant Compendium (VAC). The VAC website provides an intuitive and searchable online database of vaccine adjuvants defined through the adjuvant studies NIAID supports. The public database helps foster collaborations between the adjuvant researchers who NIAID supports and the broader scientific community.⁴

Simplify puzzling application processes

Filling out an application can be stressful, especially for critical services such as disaster assistance, small business grants or federal loans. Often still paper-based, current application processes can be challenging to complete and take months to process, extending the time citizens wait for vital services. This “time tax” imposes a burden on citizens.³ Federal agencies can reduce this burden by streamlining and automating application processes. IT initiatives focusing on reducing paperwork, increasing accessibility and integrating with other agencies during the application process will help create better citizen experiences.

“In recent years, the annual paperwork burden imposed by executive departments and agencies on the public has been in excess of 9 billion hours.”³

– Executive Order on Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government

Federal agencies can increase the availability of digital applications to reduce paperwork. Enabling citizens to complete and sign application forms online facilitates processing. Citizens don’t need to print the forms to complete them, nor do they need to wait for them to be delivered by mail. Digital applications also save federal employees time because they don’t need to re-enter the information on the forms.

Although digital applications increase efficiency and transparency, federal agencies shouldn’t eliminate the ability to complete applications on paper. It ensures citizens without reliable internet access or a digital device can still apply for the services they need. Meeting citizens on their channel of choice – telephone, website, mobile app, social media or paper – is essential. Agencies may need to invest in more modern IT infrastructure to ensure they can provide services across various channels. They also need to maintain accessibility and consistency across channels to provide positive CX regardless of how citizens engage with them.⁹

To streamline the application process, agencies should increase data sharing and standardize application forms. Centralizing application portals and permitting data to be reused across applications helps citizens understand what assistance they’re eligible for and saves time during

“Disaster victims ‘should not have to go through overwhelming, duplicative application processes when asking for help from the federal government.’”¹⁰

– U.S. Senator Gary Peters of Michigan

the application process. It reflects the government’s commitment to creating a “Federal Front Door” through USA.gov, where citizens can navigate all benefits, services and programs.³

Other initiatives focus on specific federal agencies working together to streamline shared application processes. For example, legislation introduced to create a universal application for federal disaster assistance would enable citizens who have suffered from a disaster such as a hurricane, tornado, flood or wildfire to submit one application, and it could be used by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Small Business Administration, and the Housing and Urban Development and Agriculture departments.¹⁰ Having a standardized application across these agencies reduces the burden on survivors by making it easier to locate and complete the disaster assistance process. A less burdensome experience means more citizens will complete the process and access the necessary services.



Decipher complex record systems

Both citizens and federal agencies benefit from modernized record systems. Like streamlining application processes, digitizing and integrating record systems improves transparency, efficiency and CX. The National Archives and Records Administration recently used funds from the TMF to move their record request system online, enabling millions of citizens to digitally request records rather than submitting a time-consuming paper-based request.¹¹ Although the project focused on IT modernization, it had the added benefit of significantly improving CX.

Features like automating and centralizing record systems as a part of infrastructure modernization initiatives also impact CX. The executive order on CX specifically highlights the need to develop ways to both automate citizens' access to their health records to increase accessibility and create integrated systems so citizens only need to update their information, such as a mailing address, once and have the change apply to all their records.³ As part of an overall effort to unify platforms, the Department of Veteran Affairs launched a mobile application to help veterans access health and benefits in a centralized, digital platform. Through the mobile app, veterans can schedule healthcare appointments, view claims and appeals status, upload documentation, contact their doctor and locate nearby facilities. Veterans can also update their profile information through this app, and those changes will be updated across the agency, reducing the time tax. It helps veterans spend less time entering duplicate information and reduces the risk of forgetting to update one system and losing access to certain services.¹²

Additionally, federal agencies can improve CX by making their record systems easier to navigate. Including search functions and help features for digital record systems can save citizens time and ensure they find the information they need. This increases transparency and builds trust in federal agencies.

Conclusion

To better serve citizens, the government must commit to improving customer experience. Citizens need to be the focus when improving and designing the systems people use to interface with federal agencies for vital services. Many IT modernization initiatives have the potential to include components that will also improve CX, such as human-centered design, automation, digitization and data integration. Funding is also available specifically for federal agencies to improve CX, and there's a pressing need for it as the demand for digital service delivery grows.

If your agency is unsure of the steps to improve CX, reach out to a trusted IT partner to help you analyze what systems can be improved and develop a strategy that will work within your agency's budget and resource needs. Improving CX doesn't need to be a mystery.

[Visit our site to learn how you can improve CX with NTT DATA.](#)

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Noel is an experienced strategist who infuses technology solutions across the public sector to help solve the most challenging problems. As Chief Technology Officer of NTT DATA's public sector, he blends over two decades of experience in the public and private sector with an insatiable curiosity for technology and applications. Noel has been responsible for adapting the company's offering portfolio to support clients in their shift to remote working and learning while continuing to support citizens through the expansion of digital government.

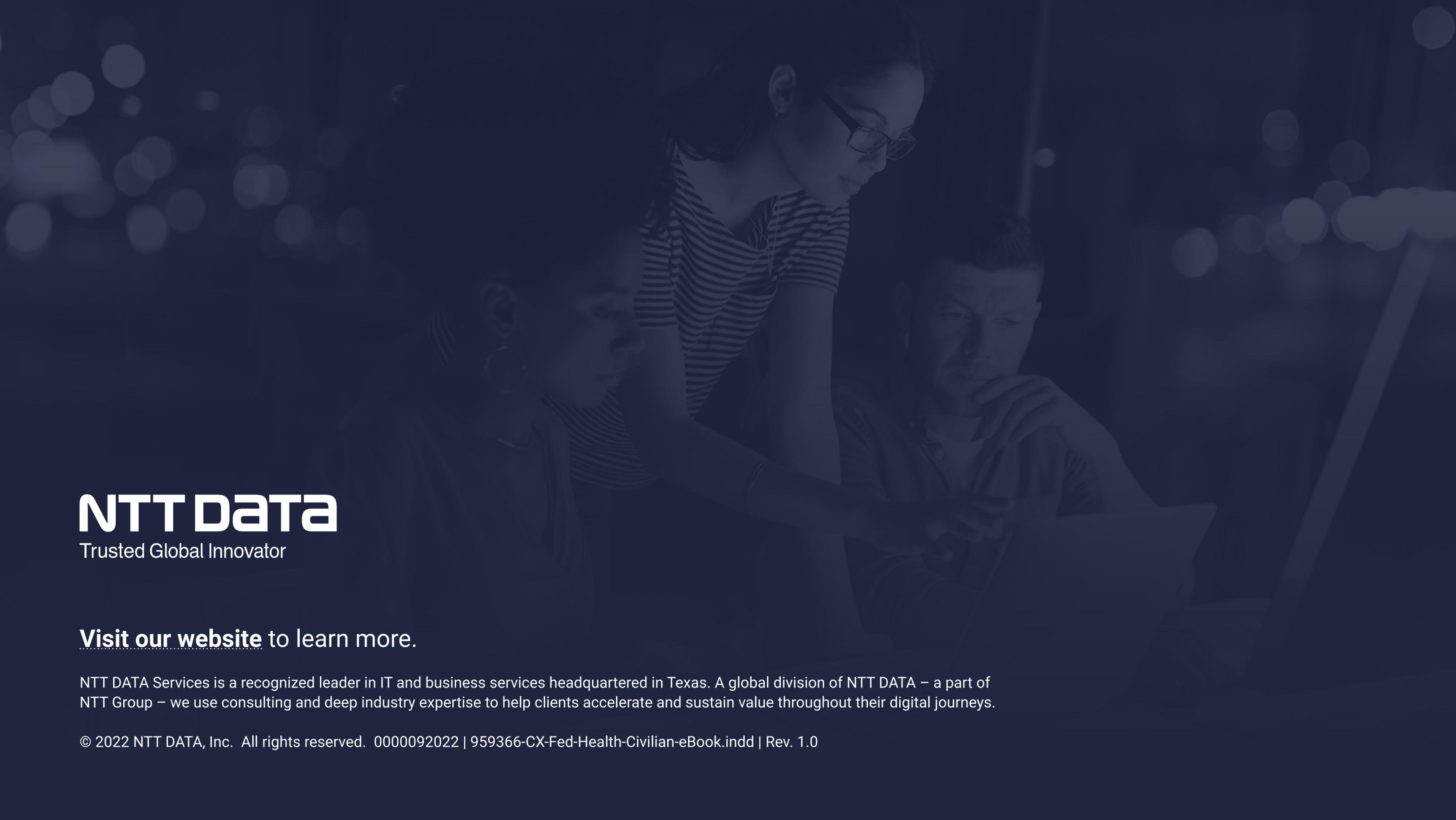


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Hannah has experience supporting federal civilian agencies, including the Department of Commerce, Department of Health and Human Services, Millennium Challenge Corporation, US Agency for International Development and US Trade and Development Agency. In her role at NTT DATA, Hannah helps develop marketing and communications materials to support the Federal Health and Civilian team. Her marketing experience analyzing and writing for the healthcare, renewable energy and IT industries gives her a unique perspective on public sector agencies' challenges.

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