AI AND THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE: NO TRAINING REQUIRED?
The pace of change is rapidly accelerating, making federal workforce transformation and its suite of enabling technologies even more important. There is little dispute about the need or urgency to make these changes. Yet there remains significant uncertainty about how to make them happen—particularly when it comes to integrating intelligent technologies and empowering the workforce to collaborate effectively with artificial intelligence (AI).

Intelligent technologies like AI, virtual reality, and advanced analytics are poised to reshape the way work is done in virtually every industry. The federal ecosystem is no exception, with changes underscored by the PMA’s Cross-Agency Priority (CAP) Goal 3 (Developing a Workforce for the 21st Century) and CAP Goal 6 (Shifting from Low-Value to High-Value Work). Change may be coming, but is the federal workforce ready to thrive in the age of AI? Accenture Federal Services research conducted by Government Business Council set out to understand key aspects of that question, including:

01 How are organizations engaging workers about plans to introduce intelligent technologies?

02 How will those changes affect workers’ roles and responsibilities?

03 Do today’s employees have the right knowledge and skills to shift to higher-value tasks and new ways of working?

04 What training will be essential to success in the government of the future?

In this piece, we share highlights of the study, explain why a focus on traditional user training is misplaced, and urge federal C-suite leaders to start engaging today. In particular, we see an opportunity for Chief Human Capital Officers to step up as transformative leaders—addressing workforce transformation in lockstep with IT modernization.

Waiting to “react” to technology change will be too little too late. It’s time to start transforming—with federal workers engaged at every step of the journey.
Working with Government Business Council, Accenture Federal Services conducted a survey of more than 500 employees at civilian and defense agencies to explore their perceptions of intelligent technologies like AI and their potential impact on the federal workforce. Among the key findings:

**Workers recognize that AI will be important—but their agencies haven’t explained how.**
Just over half of respondents (51 percent) expect the number of roles requiring collaboration with intelligent technologies will increase slightly or significantly in the next three years.

Nearly three-quarters of respondents (74 percent) acknowledged that in the next three to five years, it will be somewhat, very, or extremely important for them to develop skills to work with AI. However, nearly as many (73 percent) said their agency has communicated the potential impact of AI poorly or very poorly.

**Workers are split on intended benefits.**
Workers identified a number of compelling potential benefits of intelligent technologies, including reduced repetitive tasks and administrative burden (cited by 59 percent), improved productivity (53 percent), and reduced errors (46 percent). Interestingly, respondents were split on whether new technologies are always acquired for the benefit of employees.

**Compelling potential benefits of intelligent technologies**

- Reduced repetitive tasks and administrative burden: 59%
- Improved productivity: 53%
- Reduced errors: 46%

Percentages exceed 100 - Respondents asked to ‘select all that apply’.

Half believe their agency is committed to ensuring employee skills benefit from new technologies, 21 percent neither agree nor disagree with that sentiment, and another 29 percent believe new technologies are introduced without regard for how they will benefit employees’ current responsibilities.
Workers feel confident in their ability to adapt.

When thinking about how well they will “fit” in the government of the future, nearly half of respondents indicated that they are confident or very confident that their technical skills and abilities make them a valuable worker. Among those with low confidence in their own current abilities, most welcome learning new skills. When asked about essential skills for the government of the future, three-quarters (76 percent) indicated that adaptability will be key. Sixty-eight percent cited interpersonal communication, and 63 percent pointed to collaboration/receptiveness to others’ ideas.

Yet workers also worry about lack of training.

When asked about concerns related to intelligent technologies and their potential impact on their jobs, 61 percent of respondents said they are worried about lack of technical support and user training. The survey also asked what would motivate respondents to develop new skills in a future workforce. The number-one answer: being provided funding to cover training costs (cited by 55 percent).

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The Accenture Federal Services’ survey findings make it clear: Federal workers know AI and other intelligent technologies are coming at them sooner than later. They know the potential benefits are compelling. And while most feel confident in themselves, they would feel much more confident if they had adequate “technical support and user training”. Given the legacy approach to implementing new technology—that is, build and deploy a new system and then train users on it—it’s understandable that AI training would be top of mind.

But intelligent technology deployments are unlike anything that has come before. Traditional tech support and training may not be a requirement at all. A better approach? Human workers should no longer be viewed as the “last stop” in a rollout or as obstacles to AI. If the role of intelligent technologies is to augment human performance, workers should be involved from the onset—starting with helping identify the specific tasks that are well-suited to AI-powered augmentation or automation.
More than 80 percent of federal executives agree that within two-plus years, AI will work next to humans as a co-worker, collaborator, and trusted advisor. The potential value of such collaboration is immense. From chatbots and virtual assistants to robotic process automation and virtual reality, intelligent technologies promise to reduce errors, boost productivity, and eliminate the mundane—so the federal workforce can move from low-value tasks to high-value activities best handled by humans.

As machines handle more of the simple, rules-based tasks, humans will be responsible for more nuanced decisions and interactions. That shift will require a workforce with greater agility and more diverse skills—including strengths in “soft” skills such as interpersonal communication and collaboration.

Given that, we suggest that an overriding focus on user training may reflect an outdated view. What might be more effective is guidance on how to work alongside AI as collaborators in meeting the mission—as well as coaching to bolster the more nuanced skills essential to the 21st century workforce. In the age of AI, workers are more apt to be trainers than trainees as they help teach and tune intelligent technologies to ensure fairness, consistency, and accountability.

None of this will happen overnight, but agencies should get started today.

Here are recommendations for where to dive in:

**Educate and energize.**

Don’t explore intelligent technologies in an IT bubble. Instead, start and nurture a conversation throughout the organization to raise awareness and help employees become conversant and curious. AI will bring significant change, so engage early with formal change management activities to engage the workforce and deliver “what’s in it for me?” messages. For example, explain what technologies and modern practices are being considered, incubated, or prioritized to drive business value for their agency. Emphasize how intelligent technologies can enable employees to achieve better results by elevating their skills to higher-value tasks. Convey the organization’s commitment to bringing employees on this journey as active participants, not just as an afterthought. Share real-world examples of employees already exploring these skills across the federal government.

**Focus on tasks, not jobs.**

Intelligent technology can accomplish a growing variety of tasks. Engage workers in thinking through the specific tasks that they complete on a daily basis. Brainstorm together to identify strong candidates for automation (for example, data entry, answering frequently asked questions, or filing documents) and augmentation (for example, providing predictive analytics to support more informed decision making by humans). This lens will also help to bring forward the more natural job clusters based on the tasks being performed, allowing visibility of intelligent technology effects across jobs across groups and teams.
Allocating tasks is not a one-time exercise, and intelligent technologies are not “set and forget.” As one global manufacturer discovered, a system analyzing massive amounts of customer data was suggesting product configurations that would be almost impossible to build. The company readjusted roles so that people could train the AI to make more relevant recommendations.³

**Co-create the roadmap.**
Engage the workforce as co-creators of the organization’s roadmap for intelligent technologies. Embed them into the planning process so that intelligent technologies become part of the organization’s culture, building skills and deepened AI capability while technology is being evaluated. Address how the tools and technologies will support day-to-day work, helping employees identify where they may need to broaden or sharpen their skills—for example, in communication, customer service, or analysis. Just as important, consider what is necessary to sustaining this new roadmap/culture. How can the work be reimagined to uncover opportunities? What are the roles and skills that will be required? How will humans and machines be organized and augment each other’s core strengths?

Commercial enterprises have already begun to tackle those questions. For example, a global financial services organization is using AI to augment the work of its team of financial advisors. The AI agents use data to learn about clients, and then continually interact with their human co-workers to proactively recommend a range of options that consider clients’ dynamic situations. These data-driven insights help prepare the human financial advisors to contact the clients at the right time—and to offer more relevant advice. Another example is an organization in the transportation industry that blends human expertise and intelligent technologies to meet complex design requirements more efficiently than either could on their own.⁴

**Incubate technology AND skills.**
Various federal agencies are already actively incubating intelligent technology. Just as important is incubating the human skills that will be essential to training, tuning, and working with those technologies (see sidebar: New Faces in the Workforce). Much like babies and children, intelligent technologies thrive in environments where they can keep learning and improving. Work with your people to determine how best to provide that environment. While incubating technologies, identify and test the specific roles and skills that will be needed for their “care and feeding.”
Stepping up to the Challenge

The federal C-suite needs to tackle this transformation together. Each business function may have different needs, and “one size” of engagement does not fit all. What works for a subset of the IT workforce may not be appropriate for the finance function, and vice versa. The key is to engage the workforce early and often—ensuring that they are co-creators in the government of the future.

New Faces in the Workforce

As they adopt more intelligent technologies, federal organizations will need to hire or reskill workers for brand-new roles in what Accenture CTO Paul Daugherty has called “the missing middle.” These include roles focused on training, explaining, and sustaining intelligent technologies. What follows are examples of how some of those roles might look within a federal organization.

This is Sarah. She’s responsible for training virtual assistants. She helps correct actions so the machine-learning algorithm can get better over time. Her background is in content development and knowledge management, as well as customer experience.

This is Joe. He’s the engineer who tunes the virtual assistant. His job is to continually review the technology, and tune it to ensure it’s functioning as intended. He’s a reliable resource because of his skills in analytics, programming, and problem solving and takes responsibility to escalate issues, as appropriate.

This is Lakshmi. She has expertise in responsible AI. Her job is to ensure that the intelligent technologies process information and make decisions in a manner that is ethical, compliant, and free of bias. She’s an attorney by training but also has specialized expertise in machine learning technologies, research, and communication.

This is Bob. He’s had more than 25 years of experience supervising employees. Now he oversees a workforce of people AND machines. He leads the machine relations managers, who assess machines to be promoted and deployed to other parts or the organization or decommissioned. He adapted his skills by collaborating with his team on how to best integrate people and machines—all while understanding the mission of the organization and intended business value.
LET'S GET TO WORK TOGETHER

AUTHORS

Kristen Vaughan
Managing Director – Human Capital
/kristen-vaughan

Britiani Carroll
Senior Manager – Human Capital
/britiani-carroll

Michael Gavin
Senior Manager – Human Capital

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1 The President’s Management Agenda: Modernizing Government for the 21st Century - https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/management/pma/


4 Ibid

5 For more information, see Human + Machine: Reimagining Work in the Age of AI by Paul R Daugherty and H. James Wilson

6 For more on these use cases, see Artificial Intelligence Unleashed: How agencies can use AI to automate & augment operations to improve performance.

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