Preparing for unpredictable futures:
Citizens need a digital shake-up of the human services model
The future may be unpredictable, but one thing is certain: citizens will continue to look to human services agencies for support at the most critical moments of their lives. They will still want the skills to perform a rewarding role in society, long-term support when they retire, and the availability of social care and a welfare ‘safety net’ should things go wrong. Yet their expectations for state education, social services and pensions are increasingly out of sync with what these agencies can realistically provide.

Consider a problem like redundancy. If an individual lost his or her job in the 1980s, then he or she would apply for welfare to tide them over until they found a suitable position elsewhere. The main concern for unemployment agencies would be to ensure that claimant’s eligibility. Assuming the individual would find work again, the service would have met expectations.

But the situation is very different today. If automation makes someone’s skill-set obsolete, then he or she may never find another role that pays as well as the last.

It is a similar story with state pensions. In the past, pension agencies were able to provide annuities to all citizens on retirement. Assuming their wages had risen steadily throughout their working lives, and that they likely owned their own property by the time they retired, human services organizations could expect retirees to live comfortably on what they received.

Today, there is no guarantee that employees will earn more money over time, and reports suggest that there is a ‘generation rent’ of young professionals who will never be able to afford their own home. As these individuals approach retirement, they will face poverty—and pension agencies do not have more money to give them.

For reasons like these, human services agencies are questioning many of their tried-and-tested methods. They are exploring radical new approaches that could help them enhance—not diminish—the varied support they give to citizens.

Human services agencies must take a proactive approach

Leading human services agencies are making progress toward preventing social problems before they happen by implementing key shifts in their approach:

There is a right and a wrong time to take action

Leading agencies recognize that the work of government will be more effective if it can anticipate, reflect and influence how people actually behave. The White House’s Social and Behavioral Sciences team¹ and the UK’s Behavioural Insights Team² both seek to translate behavioral science into real-world government policy.

As this trend develops, we can expect human services agencies to focus less on alleviating pressure points, such as sudden redundancy or retirement, and more on reaching out to citizens when they are most receptive to positive guidance and support. In so doing, agencies can encourage behaviors and ways of thinking that prepare the citizen for what may come in the future.

Having a conversation, turning citizens into teammates

More and more, the emphasis will be on conversations with citizens to understand their personal situation and inspire them to change their behavior for the better, rather than simply telling them how they should live. This dialogue provides guidance to the citizen while enabling the agency to learn more about them and their potential needs. It is this approach that enables preventative counseling. Increasingly, human services agencies will also collaborate with other agencies to offer the right combination of support—providing a natural link between education, employment, social well-being and eventual retirement.

Make it personal

Human services agencies are learning from digital-enabled approaches that have been rolled out more extensively in the private sector, such as services that draw on the user’s data profile and previous preferences to create a personalized experience across different platforms.

Denmark’s Borger.dk platform, for example, gives users a webpage that draws on personal information—such as age, location and gender—to provide relevant content. This might include forms for paying fines or enrolling children in school. In effect, the site is centered around the citizen, rather than around the structure of government departments.³

Challenging mindsets and rethinking how to resolve complex social problems cannot be done overnight. Similarly, the change cannot happen through piecemeal activity or a single quick-fix digital solution.

There are, however, a number of long-term and far-reaching ambitions that human services leaders can bear in mind when trying to make decisions on a daily basis: “What would the agency of the future do?”
Creating the human services agency of the future: four big ideas to get you there

1. Break agency borders
Human services agencies should be prepared to learn from organizations outside their sector and work with them where necessary. The UK government’s work with innovation charity, Nesta, is an example of collaboration at work. At the same time, agencies should look to collaborate where possible with other human services agencies to get a broader view of citizen issues and explore new approaches together.

2. Update the culture and workforce
Agencies may need to redesign their organizations to create new roles focused on design, data and social research, bringing in individuals who may not have chosen to work in such organizations before. In the UK, the Department for Work and Pensions has introduced a director general of digital transformation. Once people with these skills and talents come into the organization, the culture will change.

3. Use efficiency to enable radical change
Radical change needs to be justified if it is ever going to take place. To validate the shift toward prevention, human services agencies need to stress the potential for greater efficiencies and cost savings. And, where they are pressured to make cuts, they should ask how they could do so in a way that will support their longer-term ambitions. By automating processes and tasks wherever possible, agencies can free up resources that can instead be dedicated to developing and introducing personalized counseling services. In Norway, electronic submissions enabled application times to be cut from months to minutes, which enabled resources to be deployed elsewhere. The result was a social benefit, but the program was originally driven by the need for efficiency.

4. Encourage—but don’t force—digital
Analytics, design and mobility are integral to this transition, but design and uptake of digital services should be a natural, not forced, consequence of a new open relationship between users and agencies. As employees with different skills and backgrounds work in the agency, they will be comfortable adopting technologies that help them do their jobs better. By investing in thousands of tablet computers, Massachusetts Department of Children and Families enabled its caseworkers to spend more time with at-risk children. Agencies need therefore to keep a close eye on emerging digital technologies and ask how they can use them and adapt them to enable their longer-term goals.

Singapore’s Work Development Agency (WDA) is an example of an agency that is intervening at different points in citizens’ lives. To meet the future demand of its economy and prevent people’s skills becoming obsolete, it helps citizens to learn different skills no matter where they are in their careers. To do so, the agency has launched a national credentialing system that brings together education, training and career progression advice.

The Illinois Secure Choice Saving Program provides the kind of personalized approach that other agencies will adopt in the future. The program was set up to cater to the millions of private sector workers in Illinois who did not have a retirement plan and were expecting to retire on social security. As part of the scheme, workers are automatically enrolled into a savings regime, which they keep across different jobs and can amend to adjust how their funds are allocated. By giving millions of citizens a personalized savings plan, the state reduces the future burden on social security.

In Denmark, the country’s Youth Guidance Centers helps young people—aged between 16 and 25—progress through the education system until they are old enough to enter full-time employment. Before starting high school, each pupil must complete an educational plan that sets out where they would like to study and the kind of job they would like to do in the future. Through analyzing this data, guidance counselors can give each pupil the advice he or she needs to make the right decisions about studying and preparing for work.

Creating the human services agency of the future means asking difficult questions and making decisions that might, at first, challenge many established assumptions and processes. Yet the result is an agency that will not only survive in an unpredictable future, but also make life better for citizens at all levels of society—ultimately delivering public service for the future.
About Delivering Public Service for the Future

What does it take to deliver public service for the future? Public service leaders must embrace four structural shifts—advancing toward personalized services, insight-driven operations, a public entrepreneurship mindset and a cross-agency commitment to mission productivity. By making these shifts, leaders can support flourishing societies, safe, secure nations and economic vitality for citizens in a digital world—delivering public service for the future.

Resources

1. “We believe that government works best when it’s built for people,” SBST, 2015, https://sbst.gov/
4. “We need new ideas if we want to preserve the quality and relevancy of our public services”, Nesta, http://www.nesta.org.uk/areas-work/government-innovation

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