Enabling individual control over the experience
Accenture Federal Technology Vision 2020

Five Trends Defining Post-Digital Government

Since 2001, the Accenture Technology Vision has provided an annual glimpse into the most important trends impacting business, government and society over the next three years. The Accenture Federal Technology Vision 2020 discusses how this year’s global trends will impact the U.S. federal government and specific agencies.

This specific report covers:
Trend 1: The I in Experience

The full report outlining all five trends can be found at accenture.com/fedtechvision2020
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Consumers increasingly hold liquid expectations, where their best customer experiences become new benchmarks for every interaction. This has prompted many government agencies to dramatically increase their focus on customer experience (CX) to close the gap with commercial leaders.

But as government agencies and commercial businesses alike work to further improve the service delivery experiences of their customers, they often discover something unexpected along the way: their customers are interested in more than just a better experience. They also want choice and what sociologists call agency or independence in how that experience takes shape.

Take, for example, the notion of personalized digital experiences. Demand for personalization is high. In a survey by Adobe, 67 percent of consumers said it is important for companies to customize content automatically based on a person’s current context. And a sizable portion of those surveyed—42 percent—even went so far as to say that non-personalized content annoys them.

But the methods that organizations use to personalize delivery of their services and products are becoming a bigger concern for people. News stories regarding both potential bias in AI systems and deceptive online marketing practices have contributed to mistrust in data-gathering practices and sinking attitudes toward black-box personalization. In RSA Security’s Data Privacy & Security Survey for 2019, only 17 percent of respondents said they thought personalized ads were ethical, and only 24 percent said personalizing newsfeeds is ethical.
Expect to have to exceed expectations

Expectations are changing dramatically, especially as digital natives enter the workforce. A popular book series, Choose Your Own Adventure, in the 1980s and 1990s allowed tween readers to personalize the storyline. Today’s generation spends countless hours in Animal Crossing, Fortnite and Minecraft constructing their own societies. As they move into adulthood, they have fueled the growth of fast casual restaurants defined by highly customizable menus with meals constructed in front of them.

What’s evident is that users want more customization and personalization, but they also want greater transparency into how these decisions are made, the ability to take the wheel in designing their experience, and assurances that their data won’t be used inappropriately.

As a result, enterprises increasingly recognize the need to partner with users to design experiences collaboratively. Organizations, ranging from Uber and SoFi to Hulu and Amazon, are ceding more control over their digital experiences to their customers to better suit their needs, preferences, and values. For example, Uber Comfort allows riders to let drivers know in advance if they want to chat or be left alone. And Hulu’s personalization engine recognizes factors like time of day and allows viewers to provide direct feedback to improve recommendations.

Federal agencies are making strides in this area as well. For example, the Veterans Benefits Administration’s redesigned appeals process provides veterans with new options that they can select to expedite their review, allowing what is typically a multiyear process to be completed in as little as four months in some cases.

In short, experience is important to customers, but so is the context around that experience. Think of context as the balance between frictionless personalization and trust that is earned through customer collaboration. As digital experiences become richer and fuller, due to the prevalence of emerging technologies such as 5G and virtual reality, the customer’s desire for greater agency will also inevitably increase.

Consequently, we are seeing a new generation of technology-driven experiences coming online that make the user an active participant in creating the experience, and, in effect, changing the paradigm to make choice and agency a central component of service delivery.
Survey data show that most federal executives already understand these trends: 92 percent of federal executives believe that, to compete in a post-digital world, organizations need to elevate their relationships with customers as partners. Moreover, a sizable majority (78 percent) of federal executives agree that organizations need to dramatically reengineer the experiences that bring technology and people together in a more human-centric manner.

But how can they implement these ideas?
What’s clear is that consumers desire personalization but don’t appreciate how it’s delivered. In many cases, this is because enterprises take shortcuts or use personalization as a means to advance their own goals rather than meet the customer’s needs.

Accenture’s 4R Personalization Framework was created to help enterprises deliver more personal experiences at scale that are designed around customer needs. It adopts the premise that online customers expect to be recognized with their preferences remembered. Furthermore, each engagement should be relevant to the citizen’s current circumstances—no promoting snow shovels in July. Moreover, customers value organizations that use their expertise in providing honest recommendations.

Revisit personalization

Federal leaders should assess whether their personalization efforts are meeting these objectives and configure them accordingly. For example, StudentAid.gov now offers its 42 million borrowers a personalized portal combining detailed, consolidated loan information with an interactive recommendation engine for comparing specific repayment strategies. This approach addresses the 4Rs while also providing users with the ability to customize their scenarios.
Rethink data collection & privacy

Our research shows that 70 percent of global consumers are concerned about data privacy and commercial tracking of their online activities, behaviors, location, and interests. And two-thirds of consumers are just as concerned about the commercial use of their personal data and online identity for personalization purposes as they are about security threats and hackers.

Given the declining trust in public institutions, these concerns are even greater for government agencies. According to the Accenture 2019 Global Citizen Survey, 73 percent of U.S. respondents wanted more personalized government services but only 28 percent were definitely interested in sharing personal data to receive it. Likewise, just 39 percent were okay with agencies sharing data amongst themselves to deliver more consistent customer service.

GSA’s Login.gov is starting to fill this gap by building citizen trust in a common identity management platform. GSA’s Identity Playbook stresses the need to work transparently and to proactively inform citizens of what’s being collected and why, and provide mechanisms for controlling what’s shared. GSA even shares its source code in a publicly accessible GitHub repository.

The same survey also found that 92 percent of U.S. respondents ranked protecting personal information as a top expectation for government CX, with 56 percent wanting to explicitly control the information that agencies share.
The data control conundrum

Expectations for privacy are growing, as many global organizations, including those operating within the U.S., are using the EU’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) as their standard for data collection. Likewise, the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA), which gives state residents the ability to control and even delete online data collected about them, may have a similar effect. Specifically, compliance costs may drive many organizations to make it a de facto standard nationwide.

In response, some companies, including Google, are adding new features to simplify the process, such as an auto-delete feature that purges customer data at set time periods. Moreover, Apple and other companies are taking steps to limit third-party tracking across their platforms.

While federal agencies are generally exempt from CCPA, it does raise citizen expectations for privacy. The National Academy of Public Administration has listed data security and individual privacy as one of its top challenges in public administration. As a potential solution, NAPA fellows Dr. Nick Hart and Dr. Jane Fountain have advanced a potential framework that calls for:

- Providing federal workers with clear guidelines for ethical data use
- Promoting accountability by allowing individuals to access their data
- Limiting data collection to what is needed and communicated
- Implementing and enforcing strong protections to safeguard citizen data
Proactivity presents opportunity

While agencies can expect new constraints on how they use personal data, there’s also an opportunity here. Because agencies are often burdened with legal and reputational constraints on how they can use data for personalization, they should seek to empower citizens more with better navigational tools. For example, agencies may consider using natural language processing (NLP) to navigate FAQ sections as well as configurable recommendation engines in place of more overt personalization features.

The VA’s Veterans Experience Office enhanced its survey platform to quickly solicit real-time veteran feedback on issues surrounding COVID-19. The VA used this insight to develop a Veterans Quick Start Guide for COVID-19 that allowed veterans to select specific services, such as secure messaging and telehealth, that best address their unique needs. As one indication of success of VA’s customer-centered approach, veterans’ trust in VA reached an all-time high in April 2020.

Keep in mind also that end user control need not be binary (yes or no), as it often is with, say, the approach many websites adopt when seeking approval to use cookies. Increasingly, organizations allow users to set these policies based on the amount of data that they are willing to exchange for increased ease-of-use and other perceived value.

Another common challenge citizens face is providing feedback—55 percent of U.S. respondents in the 2019 survey said they cannot easily do so with the agencies that they interact with. While new avenues for faster approvals are in progress, current regulations still make it difficult for many agencies to proactively solicit input from citizens. By making it easier to share feedback, federal agencies can get closer to their customers and better understand their needs.

Agencies should also pay attention to what’s being said online via social media. According to research conducted by Accenture and the Partnership for Public Service, most social media posts regarding agencies are not positive or negative. Rather, many involved consumers asking questions or seeking advice. By closely monitoring these channels, agencies like the IRS are able to quickly identify and proactively resolve issues.

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Replatform

Agencies should invest in digital platforms, which are more agile and adaptive environments that can meet emerging requirements faster. By leveraging drag-and-drop interfaces that even non-technical audiences can use to create targeted applications, agencies can make it easier to serve specific audiences and offer more individualized services.

USDA built upon the Salesforce platform to create Farmers.gov, which consolidated seven digital platforms and 150 federal web resources into a single, mobile-friendly website delivering personalized business services to farmers, ranchers, foresters, and agriculture producers. It offers a number of interactive and self-service tools essential to running a modern agricultural enterprise that users can configure to their needs.

The Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) took a similar approach in modernizing the VA Loan Electronic Reporting Interface (VALERI) platform that manages and monitors servicing activity for VA-guaranteed home loans. Working with Accenture, they enhanced the Salesforce platform with analytics and advanced reporting capabilities to enable VBA and the loan servicer to proactively intercede, when needed, to keep veteran borrowers in their homes. This underscores the opportunity for federal agencies, powered with the right technology and the right data, to serve as a critical enabler in third-party relationships, whether they be with commercial partners or state and local affiliates.

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Reinvent the user experience

Anticipating and proactively addressing specific needs creates confidence while empowering users. With one-third of residents suspicious that their responses might be used against them, executives at the U.S. Census Bureau face real challenges in building trust. In advance of the 2020 Census, the agency undertook extensive user research, creating personas and journey maps to better understand citizen expectations and concerns. And as the first digital census kicked off, the agency used online analytics to assess performance and mitigate potential roadblocks. By taking this approach, approximately four out of five self-responses were submitted online (as of 5/27/20), which is 9.2 percentage points higher than Census Bureau projections.

Even small steps can make a positive impact by offering customers proactive measures to help them better navigate federal digital services. For example, when a Social Security Administration website customer inputs her email address twice to create an account, the site validates whether the addresses match in real time so the user can correct the mistake right away. The Veterans Affairs Department’s website informs customers how long a given task will take and displays progress markers as users proceed.
Reconsider the need for explainability

Are we ready to trust important decisions made by AI-based systems if they can’t explain their rationale? In many cases, no, which is driving greater focus on the need for explainable AI. Federal agencies like DARPA have emerged as leaders in proposing approaches that “enable human users to understand, appropriately trust, and effectively manage the emerging generation of artificially intelligent partners.” By offering transparency into decision making, these systems provide citizens with an informed ability to opt into an agency’s recommendations.

Refresh—it’s never “done”

It is important to approach digital services with a mindset of iterative and continuous improvement. Take a step here, add a new function there, collect metrics and user feedback, adjust, and repeat.

A great example of this is at the Veterans Affairs Department, which migrated its many digital services for veterans to its main website, va.gov, in November 2018. Since then, the VA has seen significant increases in virtually every metric for customer traffic and usage. The biggest jump was in veterans engaging with their own personal profiles on the website: Roughly 684,000 veterans updated their online profiles in 2019, a 479 percent increase over the previous year. Until then, it was impossible to update one’s own personal information once, such as adding a new address, and have that change filter through the many service branches across the VA enterprise. VA officials have attributed their success to their focus on continuous improvement—they updated the profile tool five times in just the first year—applying user-centered design practices.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the nation sheltered, making digital experiences more important and pervasive than ever in people’s lives. For federal agencies, these channels may be the only way that many individuals feel safe or comfortable engaging with government. Consider these steps:

**Short-term:**
In the short term, government agencies should pursue greater agility in deploying additional self-service options. For example, a number of agencies quickly implemented chatbots to handle the onslaught of unemployment and healthcare queries overwhelming traditional call centers. At the same time, agencies like the Department of Agriculture, the Social Security Administration and the Internal Revenue Services have enabled self-service by expanding their acceptance of digital signatures.

**Long-term:**
In the long term, federal leaders should double-down on their commitment to digital channels. COVID-19 is a behavior-changing event. Not only will individuals continue to prefer and pursue more convenient alternatives to in-person services and meetings, but businesses will accelerate their innovation to provide them with more vital, personalized, and interactive digital experiences. This will further raise the stakes for government to keep pace.
Every year, the Technology Vision team partners with Accenture Research to pinpoint the emerging IT developments that will have the greatest impact on companies, government agencies and other organizations in the coming years. These trends have significant impact across industries and are actionable for businesses today.

The research process begins by gathering input from the Technology Vision External Advisory Board, a group of more than two dozen experienced individuals from the public and private sectors, academia, venture capital and entrepreneurial companies. In addition, the Technology Vision team conducts interviews with technology luminaries and industry experts, as well as nearly 100 Accenture business leaders from across the organization.

The research process also includes a global survey of thousands of business and IT executives, to understand their perspectives on the impact of technology in business. Survey responses help to identify the technology strategies and priority investments of companies from across industries and geographies. Accenture Research interviewed more than 6,074 executives from 25 countries and 21 industries, including 200 US federal program, business and IT leaders. The survey was fielded from November 2019 through January 2020.

In parallel, a consumer survey was conducted to understand the use and role of technology in people’s live. Accenture Research surveyed 2,000 globally, including 500 in the US, with respondents representing different age and demographic groups.

The Accenture Federal Technology Vision 2020 builds on this foundation with added insight from more than 50 Accenture Federal Services experts and survey data from two hundred federal program, business and IT leaders.
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Accenture Research shapes trends and creates data driven insights about the most pressing issues global organizations face. Combining the power of innovative research techniques with a deep understanding of our clients’ industries, our team of 300 researchers and analysts spans 20 countries and publishes hundreds of reports, articles and points of view every year. Our thought-provoking research—supported by proprietary data and partnerships with leading organizations, such as MIT and Harvard—guides our innovations and allows us to transform theories and fresh ideas into real-world solutions for our clients.

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