Digital Dialogue: Using Technology to Transform Services and Improve Outcomes
How can digital technology help improve services to citizens? How can agencies deliver a digital experience that’s user friendly, transparent and efficient? How can agencies use and share data to better target services? And, what challenges—with citizens and with government workers—need to be addressed as part of digital transformation? Those were among the questions that panelists explored at a recent Executive Briefing in New York City (see sidebar).

The High Expectations of Digital Citizens

Accenture research confirms that when it comes to digital services, citizens don’t give government a pass. In fact, more than 70 percent have the same or higher expectations for digital government services as they do for commercial digital services like those from retailers or banks. Yet only about one in four citizens (27 percent) is satisfied with digital government services.

“There is a rising expectation that people should have the same experience as citizens as they have in their personal life: easy, effective and efficiently delivered services and information, whenever and wherever they are needed,” says Kathy Conrad, director, Digital Government for Accenture Federal Services. “There is a demand on government to change how services are designed, developed and delivered. And, we can’t use technology in isolation. There is so much potential to capture new capabilities and to think of what wasn’t possible before—what we couldn’t imagine.”

Digital Technology and the City

On December 3, 2015, Accenture and the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service at New York University hosted an Executive Briefing entitled “Digital Technology and the City: Leveraging and Managing Technology to Improve Services.”

Moderated by Kathy Conrad, Director, Digital Government, Accenture Federal Services, the panel included:

- Minerva Tantoco, Chief Technology Officer, City of New York (Mayor’s Office of Technology and Innovation)
- Matthew Klein, Executive Director, Center for Economic Opportunity (Mayor’s Office of Operations)
- Robert Marano, Executive Vice President and Chief Information Officer, New York City Housing Authority
- Dr. Amen Ra Mashariki, Chief Analytics Officer, City of New York (Mayor’s Office of Data Analytics)
- Jessica Singleton, Chief Digital Officer, City of New York (Mayor’s Office of Digital Strategy)
Learning from Experience in the Big Apple

During the session, it became clear that significant work is already underway in New York City—including creation of the Mayor’s Office of Digital Strategy (ODS) to coordinate digital strategy across agencies and the Mayor’s Office of Digital Analytics (MODA) to serve as consultant to agencies as they make better use of their data.

Here, we capture some of the key insights shared during the Executive Briefing.

Start small to yield big benefits

Through pilot projects, agencies can gather and address feedback before launching a solution to all citizens. For example, when it was developing a new mobile app, the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) first piloted it with 2,500 staff who are also NYCHA residents. Their feedback and enthusiasm lead to a stronger product, while a robust communications campaign helped spread the word about “NYCHA in the palm of your hand.”

Use prototypes to address political dynamics

Agency personnel remain critical to the success of any digital initiative. Yet, driving major change can be challenging. When building a prototype of a digital solution, the Mayor’s Office of Digital Strategy builds a use case and captures analytics from that use case. Those data-driven insights help in building internal consensus—demonstrating to stakeholders how the prototype can help simplify workflows and support outcomes.

Share lessons—and data—across agencies

Agencies are working to make better use of their own data. In New York City, the Mayor’s Office of Data Analytics collaborates to help agencies determine key business questions and how available data can help answer them. Looking to the future, panelists see growing opportunities to gain even broader, more valuable insights by sharing data among multiple agencies. With a central hub and clearly defined data standards, agencies can use analytics and visualization tools to identify key trends and insights across programs.

Design for citizens, not government

Governments need to orient digital solutions around human beings—not government organizational structures. Accenture experience underscores the value of formal, user-centered service design to help shape effective, citizen-centric solutions.

The front end is just the beginning

Mobile apps, web portals and other digital “front ends” represent only part of the journey. Much of the work lies in implementing the back end: support for service delivery. For instance, empowering citizens to report potholes via social media is an improvement only if the City is able to respond promptly and effectively.

Focus on closing the digital divide...

According to a Pew Research Center report, 10 percent of Americans own a smartphone but do not have broadband at home. Fifteen percent own a smartphone but say that they have a limited number of options for going online other than their cell phone. “Those with relatively low income and educational attainment levels, younger adults and non-whites are especially likely to be ‘smartphone-dependent,’” according to the report.2 In New York City, 22 percent of citizens don’t have Internet at home; beyond the poverty line, that number rises to 36 percent.3 In designing digital solutions, governments need to consider “smartphone-dependent” citizens and how to serve them effectively.

...and finding digital talent

Government job roles rarely address the types of competencies needed in the digital age. For example, “User Experience Designer” is not a civil service title—despite being a critically important function in building digital capabilities. New York City is fortunate to have a $500 million training budget to help upskill workers for the 21st century. With a workforce of 300,000, building skills—and shaping lasting cultural change—will take time.

Above all, the Executive Briefing underscored the increasingly important role of digital technologies. As Minerva Tantoco, Chief Technology Officer in the Mayor’s Office of Technology and Innovation noted, “Technology is no longer a bigger piece of the pie. It is the plate that holds the pie together.”
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3. Minerva Tantoco, Chief Technology Officer, City of New York (Mayor’s Office of Technology and Innovation)

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