Improving Customer Experience in Government

Revolutionize the customer experience in government with digital transformation

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82%

82 percent of top-performing companies report they pay close attention to the user experience around digital processes.

Organizations worldwide rely on technology to make their operations as efficient as possible. From schools to financial institutions, the speed at which digital data travels is almost unthinkable compared to the pace of communication even just a few decades ago — and it's led many organizations to enjoy explosive growth while optimizing their operations.

This pursuit of speed and efficiency has had a huge impact on customer expectations and demands. The more efficiently businesses operate, the more quickly and effectively customers expect them to respond to their needs. That's why today's most successful decision-makers consider the customer experience (CX) a centerpiece of their processes — and a sure way to **appeal to 65 percent of consumers who factor CX into their brand loyalty.**

However, one sector in particular often struggles to keep pace with changes in both technology and customer expectations: government administration. The complex bureaucracies of many government institutions can make it difficult to change the status quo.

For as long as government services have existed, there's been a gap between what constituents expect of those services and the reality of their experience with them, **leading to issues with trust**, lack of cooperation, and, ultimately, dysfunction. This experience isn't helped by the backlogs of physical paperwork that stuffs the halls of local, state, and federal buildings across the country.

You can see this dysfunction in **growing public frustration around inadequate digital government services**, as well as **data breaches** in agencies that store citizens' data, which decrease an already low level of trust.

The goal is clear: Government agencies need to step up their digital transformation efforts to improve experiences and change public perception, or risk further alienating their constituents. The hurdles are difficult but can be overcome through a concerted effort and an investment of resources that prioritizes a superior experience. In particular, public employees need (and deserve) tools and platforms that eliminate stagnation, embrace automation, and provide digital solutions that foster trust and collaboration between agencies.

In 2021, the U.S. federal government made an effort exactly in that spirit: The Biden administration released an executive order titled **Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government**, complete with a detailed **fact sheet** that contained goals including

> *36 customer experience (CX) improvement commitments across 17 federal agencies, all of which aim to improve people's lives and the delivery of Government services.*

Within a single year, agencies like the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) reported **sweeping changes to the way they interact with customers through technology**. Though this tactic focuses on repairing the relationship between agencies and constituents, the order has created enormous opportunities for improved inter- and intra-agency workflows. According to The Bureau of the Fiscal Service's Office of Financial Innovation and Transformation, transforming end-to-end processes can generate between **$1.4 to $3 billion in savings** across the government.

So, what next?

Digital transformation can be applied to many areas of government, and the issues it solves could be pivotal for rebuilding customer experiences and overall confidence. Over the next few chapters, we'll take a deep dive into the most pressing areas, current examples of opportunities at all levels, and the ways digitization can provide substantial improvement to government services.

Making secure data collection easier than ever

At the heart of the larger digital transformation issue within the government is a hesitation to update data-collection processes. Local, state, and federal agencies all have potential to improve their methods by shifting away from cumbersome analog systems toward modern ones.

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS), for example, still deals with an **enormous number of paper forms** that have created a multiyear backlog for the agency. Every year, some citizens provide their tax data in good faith, only to be left frustrated by the outcome.

That said, digitization for its own sake isn't necessarily the answer. Some agencies have been able to incorporate more modern data-collection practices, but those processes are moot if the agency can't easily store and use that data. In many cases, **data remains siloed**, with agencies failing to aggregate information or turn it into anything actionable, ultimately defeating the purpose of digitization altogether.

For constituents to trust government agencies with their data, digital transformation needs to happen ethically and transparently — and with flexible solutions that are easy to implement, adopt, and scale. Good things happen when agencies provide their constituents with clearly stated information. As **Edelman noted** when referring to government responses to COVID-19, "People don't just need to know what has changed; in order to trust and adopt health policies, they need to know why and how decisions were made."

Local governments and their agencies may have an advantage in these digital transformation processes. Thanks to their more direct relationships with their communities, and their ability to more easily aggregate feedback, they have the most power to quickly make data collection secure and effective.

Some local agencies that have had early success implementing these tactics offer valuable lessons for future use cases, as well as insights into how this effort can trickle up to be effective at higher levels of government. We'll explore some examples of this below.

The need for accurate data collection in a pandemic

As everyone who lived through it saw clearly, the COVID-19 pandemic was an enormous stressor on almost everything — from the government to the economy to our daily lives. People expected the government to deliver a coherent, consolidated response. But that couldn't happen without a data-collection methodology that allowed the proper agencies to make informed and timely decisions.

When dealing with a new, rapidly spreading disease, decisions have to be made across multiple organizations, whether they're about medical staffing at hospitals or larger federal issues like the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Inspector General's (OIG) **COVID-19 Response and Recovery efforts**, which includes protecting public health, allocating funding, building infrastructure, and communicating policies and guidance. Historic data and pre-planned responses informed a lot of the early decision-making, but failed **to push the necessary action the moment demanded**. "Lessons From the Covid War," **an extensive report published in 2023**, found that limitations to government data systems were a major cause of response failures, and calls on investment in more modern and robust data systems to combat future pandemics.

In addition to a lack of collaboration, the federal government and larger agencies involved in the early days of the pandemic had glaring flaws in their methods for collecting data about infection rates. **Officials underused digital tools**, and as a result, data wasn't always gathered under a singular process, which led to challenges when trying to clarify and analyze the information received. Overall, the response reflected a failure to address the urgency of many communities' needs and reinforced a negative and harmful stereotype about the government's ability to deliver good outcomes.

The response highlighted the dire consequences of using siloed systems to coordinate a national emergency response. Furthermore, it underscored that larger bureaucratic bodies have much more work to do to earn back their constituents' trust.

Though it may seem odd to refer to this as a "customer experience" failure, it's a fairly apt description. In fact, the code of ethics developed for U.S.

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public health institutions and referenced in the Centers for Disease Control's **Pledge to the American People** specifically calls out the need for robust, collaborative systems to serve the public.

"Collaboration is a key element to public health. The public health infrastructure of a society is composed of a wide variety of agencies and professional disciplines. To be effective, they must work together well. Moreover, new collaborations will be needed to rise to new public health challenges." ***Principles of the Ethical Practice of Public Health***

Local governments get it right

While national efforts struggled, some local governments found success through a digital-first approach that succeeded in both rural and metropolitan areas. Whereas larger federal bodies had to wade through seas of red tape and attempt to manage massive interdepartmental communications, these smaller organizations benefited from mobile-friendly data collection methods, enabling real-time feedback from their communities to inform their response.

In the rural area of Park County, Montana, for example, local officials had largely relied on paper and analog methods to interact with their constituents and implement policy. But when COVID-19 demanded a more agile and immediate government response, the **county acted quickly to digitize** as many of its processes as possible.

Using the right tools and systems, Park County was able to transform its data collection processes in just a week, gaining access to easily generated digital forms and editable PDFs that helped gather real-time, on-the-ground information and transfer it to a central source. As a result, the county could work directly off of citizens' input using submissions to digital contact- tracing forms to assess and respond to their needs.

In another instance, **Marin County** in California found similar success with data collection. The county had been using a digital citizen information collection process before the pandemic, but the platform it used was complex and required training to navigate, slowing down the rest of the operation as a result.

> **The best systems are those that use a simple interface and automated tools to empower employees to make better-informed and strategic decisions.**

When Marin County revitalized its digital system, staff turned to Jotform Enterprise, which provided them with a no-code solution for rapid digital form creation and automated workflows. These transformative elements helped internal departments train employees, transition to digital formats, and scale quickly with ease. More importantly, it quickly turned local information from residents into a clear picture of how the disease was spreading and where local officials could take action.

Both of these stories show the power of digital transformation to effect governmental change in quick, precise ways, no matter where people are in the U.S. As Marin County found after implementing Jotform Enterprise, interconnected and well-designed systems empower agencies and their employees to work better while giving them the ability to bolster customer relationships — so much so that the county has since expanded its use of the platform to the county Assessor and Recorder's office.

Though federal agencies are more complex, the technology used to revitalize their customer experiences doesn't have to be. In fact, as these local examples prove, **the best systems are those that use a simple interface and automated tools to empower employees to make better-informed and strategic decisions.**

Managing information in a digital world

Data collection is just the beginning of digital transformation. Many government agencies and employees also struggle to make sense of the data in front of them. What these government organizations need is a truly comprehensive data- management tool that empowers those using the information to more easily access it, use it, and share it across departments.

Poor data management is often tied to poor data collection — namely, an overreliance on analog, manual, and paper methods coupled with disparate, incohesive systems. Worse, these problems lead to more issues and extra work for employees. They trickle down to every aspect of the customer experience, harming the front end of essential services and causing everything from longer wait times and mismanagement of personal information to **security issues**.

42%
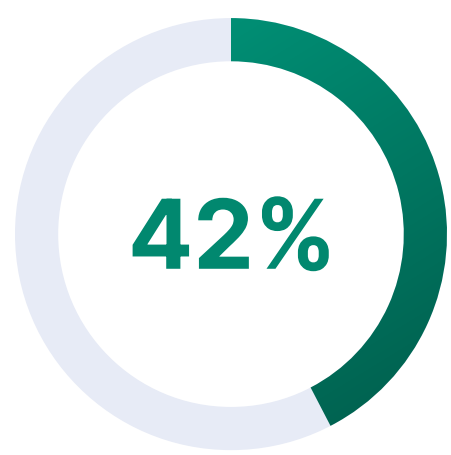
Only 42 percent of people think the government is capable of successfully executing plans and strategies that yield results. Solving the data management issue could resolve a number of flawed bureaucratic processes.

Over time, bad data governance and management lead to lower quality data and poorer outcomes for constituents. How can public employees better serve citizens when the pathways to access and act on information are clogged with red tape and archaic infrastructure? The opportunity to improve the customer service relationship is huge here — using digitization and automated tools for data-management processes, agencies can save time and money, as well as create a more virtuous cycle of trust in their CX.

Data management has the most direct potential impact on repairing the customer relationship with government services. Trust in government is at a fragile point. In their **2023 Trust Barometer Global Report**, Edelman found that survey respondents rank the government as less competent and ethical than businesses and NGOs.

The government earned **a -42 competence score and -11 ethics score in the 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer Global Report**.

The high cost of technical mismanagement

What happens when people who work for the public sector, set on serving their fellow constituents and improving the processes within government, aren't able to accomplish that very function?

In the midst of technical mismanagement and frustration on all sides, it's important to understand the source of these issues. Numerous large-scale federal agencies are hamstrung by bad systems and poor communication with one another.

Well-known backlog and management issues plague services like the IRS and the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), which lead to much of the negative sentiment about these departments. But amid growing economic issues, clearing lesser-known bottlenecks, **like the green card backlog**, is becoming increasingly important to tackle.

Unfortunately, one of the most bottlenecked agencies in the U.S. government is the Veterans Affairs office, **plagued by old-school data collection methods and inefficient data management systems**. Information for critical veterans' insurance claims gets entered quickly, but then it gets stuck in processing for months (or years).

The ultimate frustration is that while the VA has this information, it lacks the means to effectively use it to provide better service. The VA has suffered from a notorious backlog of claims for years, but **recent benefit expansions are expected to make the backlog worse**, unless leaders can implement new data management systems.

The result is a bad CX caused by long wait times and ineffective service. This failure has a tragic history, as revealed by a **whistleblower report in 2015** detailing delays in providing critical care, deleted applications for benefits, and misuse of funds. And while in the private sector this kind of CX failure would prompt customers to look to other competitors for better business, the VA is an essential, singular government service. The bad press from events like this trickle down to a larger distrust of bureaucratic data management, reinforcing the distrust that exists across agencies.

The tools to effectively manage data

To bring about change, employees must be able to effectively access and use data while significantly expanding their ability to serve their customers and collaborate with others.

These large-scale, federal data mishaps may seem like insurmountable problems, but more often than not, the answers can be found by simply selecting (and properly implementing) the right tools. Digital transformation efforts in government can be thwarted by special-interest legislation and bureaucracy. But this is hopeful news — it shows that the roadblocks aren't indicative of the effectiveness of the platforms themselves. The right people just need to put the right pieces into place.

At any level of government, data management entails dealing with large quantities of data. To enable agencies to use that data to better serve constituents requires a secure, flexible platform that thoughtfully stores and organizes information. To bring about change, employees must be able to effectively access and use data while significantly expanding their ability to serve their customers and collaborate with others.

Beyond internal use, though, these services should also be able to serve up data to the public. Citizens seeking information or services should have a clear path to their objective. All the necessary aspects of serving communities can flow through a well-made data management system that leads with the customer experience in mind.

In practice, agencies should use centralized **platforms** that can manage both data as well as the forms used to collect it. At the same time, the systems they use should be able to securely share data through central user access and management controls. By default, this type of system offers tailored access to information, allows employees to pull customer details in a snap, and **connects forms to spreadsheets** to collate data. Within these systems, **employees can collaborate** across channels and departments as well as solve customer issues at a much higher speed.

These tools, when used effectively, can bridge the widening trust gap between constituents and government agencies. By addressing both the terms of the customer experience and the common issues civil servants face, these platforms can help create stronger, more cooperative citizen-government relationships.

Protecting consumer and citizen privacy

Perhaps the most widely known example of dwindling trust in government has to do with data privacy. Agencies have had mixed success addressing this issue over the years. Some major exposures have happened as a result of poor personal data management (rather than a system failure), and in other instances, **foreign powers have hacked through** seemingly rock-solid cybersecurity. Even so, these federal security issues have more to do with the quality of the technology itself rather than how systems are implemented.

Digital data collection has to consider the protection of citizen information above all. The EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has influenced data security concerns across nations and highlighted how important an issue this is to the international community. Outside of California's similar legislation — the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) — the U.S. is only recently making strides to **modernize and strengthen data policy**.

In the context of digital transformation, problems with citizen privacy stem from a lack of connectivity across organizations and a reliance on outdated processes. Sensitive information is gathered at all levels of government, but the lack of a reliable, **nationalized infrastructure** to store it poses glaring issues for security. Particularly for local governments that

> **Security and privacy are the backbones of trust, and without them, governments will struggle to offer a good customer experience. expanding their ability to serve their customers and collaborate with others.**

lack access to sophisticated systems, finding the right tools to allow employees to work, communicate, and deliver a good CX without fear of breaches is paramount.

Ensuring the privacy of citizen data is essential to building trust and good faith in the customer experience. In discussing cooperation and citizen input, the unavoidable question always comes down to: "If I give you this information, will you keep it safe?" If government agencies can't answer that question with an honest yes, any hope of a trusting relationship will crumble. Security and privacy are the backbones of trust, and without them, governments will struggle to offer a good customer experience.

A breach in the system

The scariest word a data security analyst can hear is "breach." A pressing privacy and security issue that affects government agencies large and small, these lapses in protection can allow bad actors to tap into massive amounts of government and personal data to use (or, more likely, sell) at their whim. No matter the size or scale of the breach, the resulting public sentiment is always a mixture of fear and frustration.

For local governments, the culprits in many of these breaches are poorly implemented, third-party data-collection systems. Many smaller divisions and agencies use external systems that can affordably handle and support different parts of their operations. In balancing cost and effectiveness, many end up piecemealing a backend system to help deliver on the numerous government services their citizens expect — but in doing so, aren't always guaranteed the necessary level of security.

A cyber attack in the summer of 2023 **exposed personal identification and financial data for millions of Americans** with a flaw in the popular file-transfer software MOVEit. Officials traced the attack to a Russian ransomware gang conducting a large-scale cyberattack spanning the globe. In the U.S., this cyberattack was concentrated on agencies in Oregon and Louisiana but hit hundreds of government organizations across the globe.
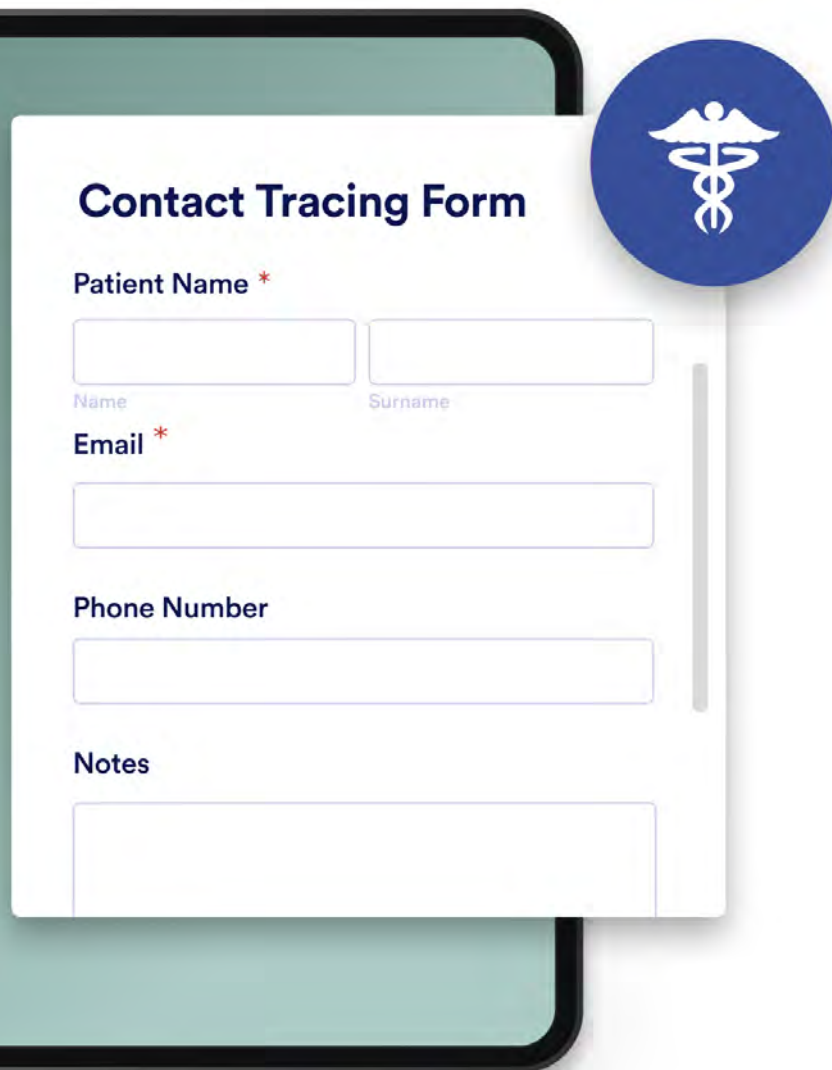
A new way to fill in the gaps

Many citizens would like to think that no price is too high to pay to maintain data privacy — especially when it's their data in question. But the right solution isn't as much about throwing money at the problem as it is being more strategic and thoughtful in the implementation. This includes a careful process of **choosing the right vendors** and finding the platform with the strength and flexibility in infrastructure that can build a bridge from legacy systems to a more efficient, digitized future.

Above all else, government agencies need to take a comprehensive approach to data collection, which entails collecting, maintaining, and protecting data within a cohesive system. In particular, agencies should exclusively work with platforms that are **SOC 2 compliant**, the gold standard of data management in terms of privacy and integrity of the information. Government IT employees **would likely appreciate** this kind of technology, as it better guarantees interconnected security, which ensures no glaring, breachable gaps in data collection and management.

Another important aspect of securing the privacy of citizen data is limiting access. The platforms these agencies use should implement protections for accessibility like single sign-on (SSO) and payment card industry (PCI) certification for payment processing, both of which are standard but stalwart protection measures for common functions. These tools aren't necessarily expensive or reserved for the most secure data sets — any organization can access and implement these safeguards against the most common types of breaches.

Additionally, governments and communities need to fully comply with all regulations across industries and use cases. From the aforementioned **GDPR** to **HIPAA** and other regulations, data compliance is a serious subject that needs to be incorporated into any agency's security and privacy strategy. The ideal system has the flexibility to adjust to evolving global and industry regulations, helping organizations avoid data breaches, trust issues, and hefty fines. Compliance is essential to ensuring a safe, reliable customer experience.

Streamlining the customer experience with payments and integrations

Clearly, a great customer experience is the key to developing deeper relationships with constituents and building a foundation of long-term trust. When a user can quickly access the information they need, make the necessary payment, or talk to the right person, they'll be grateful for a well-designed process. As a result of these positive experiences, users will have more trust in the processes and be more likely to use other services in the future, ensuring the kind of cooperation that data-collection efforts need to be successful.

Regardless of the sector, a great customer experience is largely influenced by convenience. Every organization needs to ask essential questions that put them in their customers' shoes. How fast can a user get to their desired outcome? How clear is the path to purchasing? What are the potential roadblocks to completing a task? When agencies consider these issues before and during experience development, rather than trying to repair damage after the fact, they set themselves up for a seamless process and positive customer relationships.

To that end, a well-designed customer experience in government ensures happier customers and smoother paths to collecting data. But to achieve that, agencies need platforms that allow for smooth integration of services and transparent, secure payment processing. These crucial elements can create the most friction, so organizations must keep their customer experience top of mind during any implementation.

The latest White House executive order and **fact sheet** mentioned above emphasize these themes and strategies. The administration is already making significant headway in redesigning digital government platforms to be centralized and streamlined, creating a "digital Federal Front Door" that provides quick access to services, payments, and more in three clicks or less (and as few site redirects as possible). Agency web pages are taking into account their knowledge of common constituent needs, featuring new user experiences based on the key life events, moments, and to-dos that Americans commonly experience when interacting with the government.

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The need for better integrations

> **"** *Every interaction between the Government and the public, whether it involves filing taxes or renewing a passport, is an opportunity to deliver the value, service, and efficiency that the public expects and deserves.* **"**

A lot of common and necessary interactions with government agencies are already unpleasant. Paying fines, submitting claims, and other stress-inducing processes are inherently contentious, even as agencies take steps to make them easier. Digitization and the push for more online submissions have already helped alleviate many issues, but addressing other areas of opportunity could enhance the overall experience.
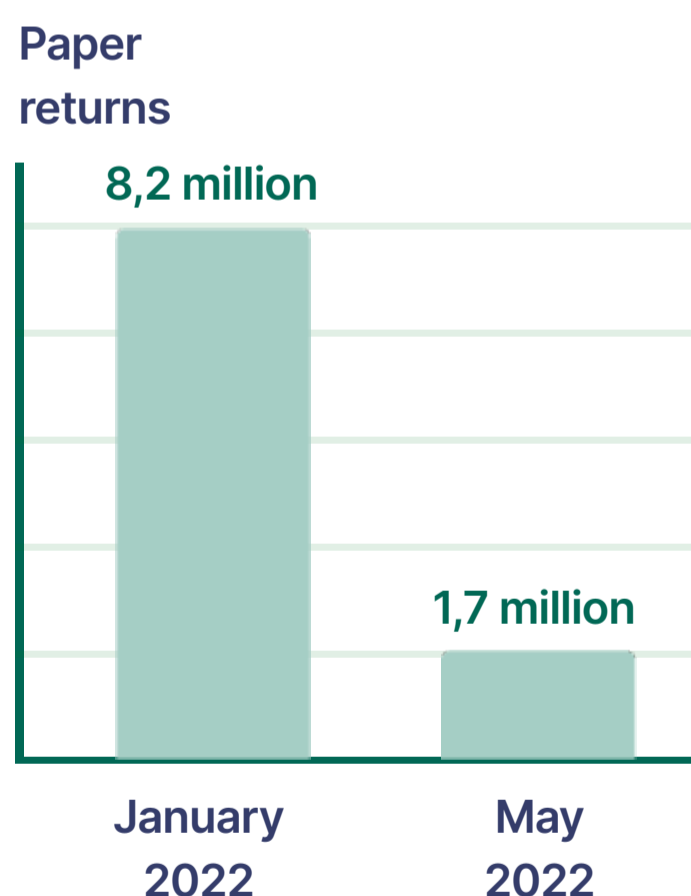
As digital transformation continues at state-level governments, one example of improvement has been to allow citizens to pay tickets online. The process itself is far easier than mailing or phone procedures, enabling users to immediately address a violation.

However, when the system in place isn't set up for easy payment or there are flaws in integrating payment processors, that user's kernel of frustration at receiving a ticket can morph into a deep distrust of digital processes. But strong customer experiences and straightforward payment options make these cumbersome processes easier to navigate.

Tax filing is another area where the digital customer experience has plenty of improvement potential. Currently, data collection is tricky because of analog or digital methods that include numerous phases and forms to fill out. At the same time, **an overwhelmed IRS** often struggles to manage and act on the data, leaving employees unable to carry out the necessary tasks to serve their customers effectively.

Paper returns

The IRS started 2022 with about 8.2 million paper returns, and 1.7 million remained as of May 6, according to Ken Corbin, chief taxpayer experience officer.

Tax season produces an enormous amount of anxiety and requires a long journey through multiple forms before those filing can reach the final **payment processing phase.** These issues have prompted the agency to begin **working on a free tax e-file system** to make filing taxes more streamlined and efficient for taxpayers, without the need to use for-profit, third-party tax preparation software.

These are clear areas of opportunity for government services to improve secure payments through better processes and broader acceptance of consumers' preferred methods of payment. By default, this would make the more burdensome (but necessary) aspects of interacting with the government much easier, no matter the use case.

Taking advantage of customer-first tools

Government agencies and organizations need to build processes with CX in mind, first and foremost. This ethos was the main thrust of the Biden administration's recent executive order, but it remains one of the biggest areas of improvement in the ongoing process of digital transformation. Even if data collection and management are effective and security is solid, a clunky online user experience will still leave a customer frustrated.

To combat these issues, agencies need to build customer-facing tools designed to eliminate the roadblocks users face. Helpful integrations include forms with **built-in payment tools** to accept payments within a form, creating a complete end-to-end experience on one platform. These kinds of integrations give users an easier path to complete tasks and get those aggravating payments out of the way as fast as they can.

As a rule, external apps should make things easier, not further complicate the experience for both the agency and the constituent. Agencies should aim to keep the customer journey as streamlined as possible. Too often, users get lost in a process because the tools they're using don't fit an archaic backend architecture — something that **a flexible application programming interface (API)** could solve easily. Similarly, governments can take advantage of tools that make it easy to quickly digitize existing paper forms, like **an integration** that streamlines document collection and management down the line and improves the quality of the CX.

> "
> *USA.gov will be redesigned as a centralized and streamlined "digital Federal front door" so the public can get access to all Government benefits, services, and programs in just 1 to 3 clicks, taps, or commands from the USA.gov homepage, without navigating duplicate and outdated Federal websites.*
> "
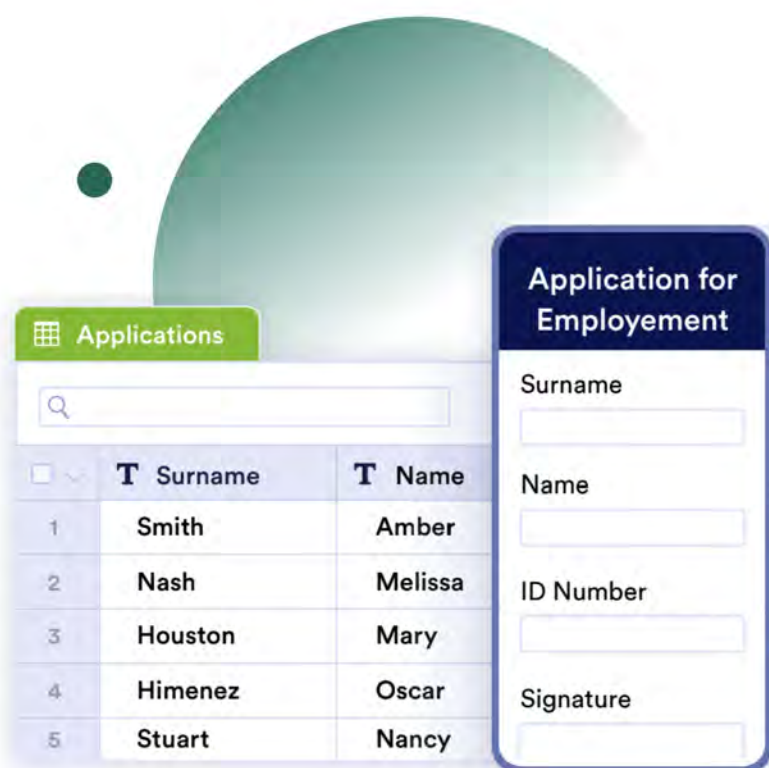
The government customer experience people deserve

The barriers to digital transformation in government may seem high, even as processes across other organizations accelerate at whirlwind speeds. The evidence shows enormous potential for digitization across government enterprises to simplify and streamline the customer experience. As a result, constituents will be more trusting and likely to engage in services, thereby improving data collection overall.

The good news is the tools used by the private sector to deliver outstanding customer service are available for government agencies of all shapes and sizes to use as well. Digitization led by the right technology can make any government enterprise a well-oiled machine, improve customer satisfaction, and deliver better outcomes across departments. As long as agencies are willing to embrace the necessary changes, they can foster deeper trust with constituents and better collaboration across agencies.

At the end of the day, the goal is to develop trust and make each community feel like their tax dollars will be used to effectively improve their lives. Digital transformation is an essential part of making that goal a reality.

To learn more about how Jotform Enterprise helps Government agencies

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