

Delay Government: How Technology Can Fix Slow Federal Service Delivery

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The U.S. government offers slow, outdated services. Congress and federal agencies should invest in digital technology and modernize their approach to service delivery to transform the current delay government into a modern, fast, digital-first government.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Due to the government's monopolistic nature, sprawling bureaucracy, poor accountability, and outdated technology, federal service delivery in the United States remains slow and inefficient compared with the private sector and other developed countries.
- Numerous executive orders (EOs), laws, and other federal plans to modernize and expedite federal service delivery have either stalled or failed entirely.
- A burdensome tax code, manual processes, old back-end technology, and a lack of modern digital services makes taxpayers spend an average of 13 hours completing returns (twice as long for business owners) and then wait up to six months for refunds.
- The State Department's antiquated processes and nonexistent customer-facing digital services in processing passports result in the agency contending with huge backlogs and customers waiting months for this critical document.
- Federal agencies broadly continue to rely too heavily on paper processes, poorly designed websites, and inefficient legacy IT, while not doing enough to measure timeliness or user experience in delivering customer services.

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INTRODUCTION

Federal government services are too slow. In his 2021 EO, “Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government,” President Biden explained that when a federal customer “waits months for the Government to process benefits ... that lost time is a significant cost.”¹ He refers to this experience as a “time tax,” and it is a symptom of what this report refers to as a “delay government.”² The U.S. federal government currently operates as a delay government because many of the critical services it provides to customers (e.g., Medicare and Medicaid, passports, Social Security, tax refunds, veterans benefits, etc.) are delivered too inefficiently and slowly through a bureaucracy of complex procedures, manual processes, outdated technology, and insufficient staffing.

There are many reasons why federal services got to this state, the principal ones being the lack of incentive to improve—if you don’t like passport services, it’s not as if you can go to another passport provider—and limited funding to staff up fully to meet service demand. In the private sector, when demand grows, a company hires more staff. In the federal government, when demand grows, the line for delay grows.

On top of that, slow adoption of best-in-class digital technologies means low productivity of federal staff, which in turn leads to delay. And while different administrations and Congresses have made attempts to improve processes and expedite services over the past few decades, this

report shows that federal agencies still contend with numerous common issues contributing to a delay government. These issues include a continued reliance on paper, poorly designed websites, vast networks of inefficient legacy IT, and a lack of timeliness metrics for delivering customer services.

To further highlight federal challenges in delivering faster services, this report explores two widely used, critical federal services: tax filing with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and passport processing with the State Department. Both the customer experience EO and the president's latest budget specifically call out improving these two services with online tools and digital technology.³

This report digs into both services to better understand why delivery remains slow, as well as offers insights so that future digital transformation investments in the federal government work to remedy such issues. It also highlights notable examples of governments around the world that are leveraging digital technology to provide faster, more efficient services to their constituents, including the European Union's "once only" approach to customer data collection and South Korea's full-scale "Digital Platform Government" initiative.

Customers today have high expectations for services to be delivered intuitively, simply, and quickly. In their day-to-day lives interacting with businesses, customers have come to expect high-quality digital interactions and have extended that expectation to government. Unfortunately, federal services are failing to meet these expectations, offering services in a matter of months that should be delivered in days. Finally, this report offers a set of recommendations that aim to address some of the identified issues and help transform the current delay government into a modern, fast, digital-first government.

- The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and federal agencies should:
 - modernize websites and digitize forms;
 - replace slow and costly legacy systems;
 - embrace innovative, emerging technologies;
 - collect data on service delivery from the customer's perspective, including speed; and
 - modernize the culture and approach to service delivery.
- At the same time, Congress should:
 - pass the Legacy IT Reduction Act;
 - modernize federal IT procurement and implementation; and
 - reform government hiring and firing.

BACKGROUND

“Why is government so slow?” is a question many customers have likely asked themselves—or perhaps asked the person sitting next to them—as they’ve sat frustrated waiting their turn at a Department of Motor Vehicles or applying in-person for a new passport. There are many reasons that help explain the government’s sluggish delivery of services to customers, such as outdated technology, overreliance on paper, and poor back-end processes. Elected officials, bureaucrats, and others working in and around government are clearly aware of these issues too. There have been numerous efforts over the last few decades to improve and expedite federal service delivery, though such efforts evidently have been unsuccessful. This section offers background into why there is delay in federal service delivery and shares some of the failed or stalled efforts to date to modernize service delivery.

Why the Delay in Federal Service Delivery?

One of the principal reasons that government service delivery across all levels of government is comparatively slower and more inefficient than the private sector is simply that many government services are monopolies. Government goods and services are often “public goods,” or goods that cannot be adequately provided by the market (often referred to as “market failure”).⁴ For many services, such as permits, taxes, and passports, a government agency or department is the sole service provider. A customer has no choice but to interact with that particular provider for that particular service. Because these providers have no competitors, there is less incentive to improve service delivery or hold themselves accountable to their customers by investing in internal performance management or improvement processes. This circumstance has also resulted in a general lack of oversight in federal service delivery. In theory, these agencies are indirectly accountable to voters, but the policy and procedural decisions are often too far removed from elected officials, and watchdog agencies such as the Government Accountability Office (GAO) only have so much influence. In short, the unique circumstance of government as the sole service provider produces an environment that is not conducive to maximizing efficiency, speed, or customer experience.

Another complicating factor in government service delivery involves the complexity of rules, processes, and procedures in how agencies deliver services.⁵ Many agencies adhere to outdated bureaucratic protocols. Part of this adherence is due to legislative and policy constraints that do not allow federal service providers to quickly change or improve their processes, but another reason is the dominating culture of risk aversion in the federal government.⁶ From its perspective, certain procedures work even if they do so very slowly. Before the digital era, a slower, deliberate approach to service delivery may have been necessary—for instance, in confirming an individual’s identity through a disparate paper process—but modern technologies and organizational techniques allow service providers to be both thorough and fast. Both complex policies and risk-averse culture restrict innovation and result in a general slowdown in digital transformation. Federal customers in the 21st century have high expectations in service delivery and, unfortunately, many of the efforts to modernize federal service delivery have either failed or stalled.

Efforts to Modernize Federal Service Delivery

Legislators and policymakers have been aware of the federal government’s issues with slow and inefficient service delivery for decades. While there have been numerous laws, mandates, and

plans to modernize federal service delivery, both at the agency level and government-wide, these initiatives have been largely unsuccessful in making government services faster and more efficient. This section highlights a few of these initiatives:

- **Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980:** Congress designed this law to reduce the total amount of paperwork burden the federal government imposes on private businesses and citizens, including a goal to calculate “burden hours” that government processes exact on the public.⁷ An amended version of the law, the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, established strict processes for how federal agencies collected information from the public and effectively made OMB’s Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs the clearinghouse for forms and other “information collections.”⁸
- **E-Government Act, or E-Gov Act, of 2002:** This law specified a framework for federal agencies to use “Internet-based information technology to enhance citizen access to Government information and services,” including time savings.⁹
- **Executive Order 13571, Streamlining Service Delivery and Improving Customer Service (April 27, 2011):** President Obama’s mandate required federal agencies to develop plans that identified ways to use innovative technologies to accomplish particular customer service improvements, including decreasing service delivery times.¹⁰
- **Executive Order 13576, Delivering an Efficient, Effective, and Accountable Government (June 13, 2011):** President Obama’s initiative focused on monitoring and promoting federal agency progress in “making Government work better, faster, and more efficiently.”¹¹
- **21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act, or 21st Century IDEA, of 2018:** This act focuses on improving government customers’ digital experiences, with the goal of having government services meet modern expectations in a way that is “quick, easy, secure, and accessible.”¹²
- **Biden-Harris President’s Management Agenda (PMA) Priority 2, “Deliver excellent, equitable, and secure Federal services and customer experience”:** This priority in the president’s roadmap for how the executive branch focuses on leveraging technology to simplify and streamline how customers interact with the federal government.¹³
- **Executive Order 14058, Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government (December 13, 2021):** President Biden’s mandate directs 17 federal agencies to put customers at the center of service delivery, including using digital technologies to improve customers’ experiences with tax filing and passport processing.¹⁴

While these initiatives demonstrate a clear understanding of the problem—namely that government services need to be more modern and faster to meet customer expectations—they have ultimately fallen short in achieving these goals.

Figure 1: Screenshot of Form DS-11, Application for a U.S. Passport with “Estimated Burden.”¹⁵



METHODS

This report examines two critical federal agencies that have historically struggled to provide efficient and timely services to customers: filing taxes with the IRS and applying for or renewing a passport with the State Department.¹⁶ OMB has designated both of these agencies as high-impact service providers, or HISPs, which are federal entities that “provide (or fund) high impact customer-facing services, either due to a large customer base or a high impact on those served by the program.”¹⁷ HISPs include 35 federal service providers across 17 agencies and represent most of the fundamental services and activities the federal government’s civilian agencies perform for its customers. Federal customers include “any individual, business, or organization (such as a grantee or State, local, or Tribal entity) that interacts with an agency or program, either directly or through a federally-funded program administered by a contractor, nonprofit, or other Federal entity.”¹⁸

Through exploring two well-known, widely used services, this report aims to identify whether certain issues explain why customer-facing federal services are often delayed. Additionally, it applies such insights to make a claim about federal service delivery in general—namely that these services reflect issues that many federal HISPs and agencies face in providing timely services to customers—and utilizes a variety of sources to inform its findings and recommendations, including:

- program legislation, rules, and procedures, as well as agency organizational processes;
- service and program data;
- agency and GAO reports; and
- private sector and nonprofit organization reports.

FINDINGS

The two selected HISPs in this report are hugely impactful federal services. Every year, half the U.S. population files taxes and over 20 million people apply for or renew passports.¹⁹ While these services are for entirely different purposes and the agencies contend with different challenges, they share several common issues representative of the federal government’s slow service delivery. This section provides an overview of tax filing and passport processing services, and then shares a set of common findings largely applicable to the federal government. Additionally, this section offers a set of international examples of digital services that produce the type of service delivery the U.S. federal government should aspire to.

Filing Taxes With the Internal Revenue Service

For most people, filing taxes with the IRS is not a fast or enjoyable activity.²⁰ The IRS estimates that taxpayers spend an average of 13 hours completing their tax returns, or 25 hours if the filer owns a business.²¹ Additionally, refunds can take as long as six months.²² Among its peers in the developed world, such time burdens in the American process are uniquely bad. The United Kingdom, Germany, and Japan offer return-free tax filing systems that require little or no action from the taxpayer.²³ Other countries, such as Denmark and Spain, employ reconciliation systems where the tax authority uses known or third-party data to fill out the return so that the taxpayer simply reviews and confirms the information.²⁴ In the United States, the tax code is notoriously complex, with over 2,600 pages, more than 1 million words, and constant changes.²⁵ Such

complexity makes a relatively straightforward activity difficult and time-consuming for filers and explains why an industry of accountants and third-party service providers is required to assist people with their tax returns.

Even to file a basic tax return, an individual first needs to access their W-2 form from their employer—as well as other earning and income statements, such as 1099 forms—information the IRS already has. Then, taxpayers must decide how to file (mail or third-party software), pick their filing status, itemize deductions and credits (of which there are many), add banking or payment information, and likely complete many other steps according to their unique circumstances.²⁶ One of the reasons the tax code is complex is that it aims to be fairer through features such as a progressive tax structure and deductions, but the IRS’s current tax filing process is unnecessarily burdensome and lengthy and does not take full advantage of modern technology. For example, there has never been an online direct file option—though, fortunately, a pilot is in the works—even though 94 percent of tax returns are filed electronically through services such as H&R Block and TurboTax.²⁷ Without its own online customer portal to support the most popular filing method, the IRS will continue to struggle in measuring timeliness and customer satisfaction with e-filing.

Furthermore, the e-filing percentage would likely be even higher, but the IRS still manually processes millions of paper returns, as customers have no other means to comply in certain circumstances.²⁸ For the 2021 tax season, paper returns took an average of eight months to process, creating a backlog that cost the IRS \$3 billion.²⁹ Former IRS commissioner, Chuck Rettig, put the situation succinctly when he stated that the IRS is a “paper-based organization operating in a digital world economy.”³⁰ With over 800 forms and schedules, it is no surprise that in 2022 GAO recommended the IRS digitize more paper returns and address barriers to e-filing.³¹

While the IRS has made attempts to modernize the tax filing process—such as establishing the Enterprise Digitalization and Case Management Office to digitize its essential business processes and move away from paper—many of these efforts have not come to fruition.³² For example, the IRS began using facial recognition to improve its identity verification process when taxpayers access its online tools, which could also greatly expedite how people file taxes online.³³ Unfortunately, the agency abandoned facial recognition despite evidence that the political panic surrounding the technology was both overblown and counterproductive.³⁴ Similarly, the IRS historically struggles with customer service and answering phones. Rather than actively exploring how digital technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), could transform how quickly the agency responds to customer inquiries, the agency continues to invest in the traditional call center approach.³⁵ Indeed, a recent funding plan intended to transition the IRS to “a modern, digitally capable, customer-centric agency” makes no mention of AI at all besides describing a run-of-the-mill, FAQ-style chatbot.³⁶

The IRS’s backend technologies also explain why filing taxes and receiving refunds take so long. A recent GAO report notes that “as of late September 2022, IRS had about 12.4 million returns to process, resulting in refund delays for millions of taxpayers.”³⁷ A separate GAO report explains that the IRS uses hundreds of outdated applications, software, and hardware systems.³⁸ One particularly critical system that helps the IRS assess taxes and generate refunds relies on a computer programming language, COBOL, from when the agency built the system in the

1960s.³⁹ Not only do such legacy systems inhibit and slow how the IRS delivers services to customers, but such technology is hard to maintain, as less software supports it and fewer developers know the programming language, which also means more security risks. In August 2023, the Treasury’s inspector general for tax administration reported that the IRS had lost thousands of microfilm cartridges—a stereotype of outdated technology—containing sensitive tax data from 2010.⁴⁰ Lastly, a third GAO report from 2022 points out issues with the IRS’s “Where’s My Refund?” tool, the website on which taxpayers can track the refund status for their latest return. According to GAO’s findings, the 20-year-old tool is not mobile-friendly, easily navigable, or effectively utilizing data, and “provides limited information on refund status and delays.”⁴¹

Finally, IRS staffing shortages have delayed modernization efforts and impacted service delivery speed, and the agency has certainly struggled with budget cuts and low staffing levels over the past several years.⁴² But last year’s Inflation Reduction Act—a law that aims to curb inflation by reducing the federal deficit, including by lowering health care costs, promoting clean energy, and increasing tax revenue—provided the IRS with \$80 billion in funding over 10 years. Yet, the IRS seems overly focused on expanding its workforce and investing in outdated approaches to improving customer experience rather than on technology. The IRS’s Taxpayer Experience Office supposedly focuses on “enriching all IRS interactions through an agencywide customer-centric approach” and has several solid strategic priorities, including expanding digital services, but it is unclear what the office has accomplished to make progress on these priorities.⁴³ As it stands, filing taxes remains onerous even in the simplest of scenarios.

Passport Processing at the State Department

For many Americans, passports are the most highly valued identification document because they prove citizenship and allow people to travel internationally. As such, issuing passports is one of the most critical services the federal government provides. Furthermore, the Bureau of Consular Affairs—the agency within the State Department responsible for passport issuance—is currently experiencing unprecedented demand as countries reopen their borders following pandemic-era restrictions.⁴⁴ In 2022, the State Department issued a record 22 million passports and is currently on track to issue 25 million in 2023.⁴⁵ Secretary of State Antony Blinken recently explained that while passport applications typically peak seasonally during the high-travel spring and summer months, “basically it’s full time now.”⁴⁶ Unfortunately, the State Department is ill-equipped to contend with this demand, as the agency’s archaic application process includes too many manual steps, resulting in backlogs and long processing times.

While customers can access general information online, they must take several offline steps and physically show up in person to apply for a passport.⁴⁷ Customers must either acquire a paper form from a local passport services office or download and print a form online after filling in their details.⁴⁸ The in-person application process includes other manual steps, such as buying a printed passport photo that meets specific size and resolution standards, bringing in originals and photocopies of citizenship evidence and ID, and having to pay \$130 by either check or money order. Customers complete all these steps to ultimately wait 10 to 13 weeks for their passport for routine processing and 7 to 9 weeks for expedited if they pay another \$60.⁴⁹ Right now, the State Department recommends applying six months in advance of planned travel or passport expiration date.⁵⁰ A two-month wait is too long; a six-month wait is unacceptable.

The Biden administration is clearly aware of the customer-unfriendly process. The 2021 customer experience EO specifically calls out the passport process's time and money costs to "print, go to a post office, and use a paper check."⁵¹ And fortunately, the latest presidential budget includes \$163 million for the State Department to "revamp the delivery of Passport Services so the public can access core services online."⁵² But it is unclear whether the State Department is up to the task. In looking at passport renewals, for example, the State Department piloted an online process beginning in August 2022 that aimed to make the process easier while reducing processing times. Unfortunately, that often was not the case, and the agency paused online passport renewal in February 2023 to "continue to make improvements to the customer experience" with the promise of a more complete rollout of the online renewal process later this year.⁵³ In the meantime, customers must return to renewing by mail or in person. With no online option for applications or renewals, the Bureau of Consular Affairs continues to operate in a paper-based environment, which contributes to the agency's slow passport processing—and also restricted the agency's telework response during the COVID pandemic.⁵⁴

Finally, the online renewal pilot also incorporated the State Department's new MyTravelGov feature, an online customer account that only allows users to apply for a "Consular Report of Birth Abroad" now that the online passport renewal feature is paused. MyTravelGov is not compatible with the Safari web browser on iOS, meaning Apple iPhone users must download Google Chrome or Microsoft Edge to fully access MyTravelGov on their phones, despite over 90 percent of iPhone users preferring the default Safari browser. Ultimately, the State Department's digital transformation efforts have not transformed the agency's outdated processes to deliver services quickly or efficiently.

Common Issues in the Federal Delay Government

While filing taxes and issuing passports are specific services, many of the problems surrounding service delivery in these two HISPs are representative of the federal government broadly. This subsection offers a summary of common issues in today's delay government.

- **Continued overreliance on paper:** The federal government maintains over 10,000 unique form types and processes around 125 billion total forms each year.⁵⁵ This is burdensome for both federal customers, who frequently must print and fill out these forms, and federal employees, who spend a significant amount of time processing paperwork.
- **Bad websites:** According to a 2023 industry report, "Citizens are experiencing more difficulties in completing their desired action when visiting a government website compared to previous years."⁵⁶ When customers cannot complete an action online, they often try to call the agency directly, which usually results in delays and long wait times.⁵⁷ Additionally, federal websites continue to struggle with accessibility and mobile friendliness. According to the Federal IT Dashboard—a General Services Administration - run website that shares details of federal IT initiatives and websites—only about one-third of federal websites have "no detectable accessibility issues" and only half "appear to be mobile friendly."⁵⁸ As 27 percent of adults in low-income households are smartphone-only Internet users, this issue increases time burdens for a particularly vulnerable population.⁵⁹ Finally, 80 percent of federal websites do not use the U.S. Web Design System (USWDS), the General Services Administration's guidelines and code intended to standardize websites across agencies.⁶⁰

- **Backlogs and legacy IT:** Many federal agencies contend with substantial backlogs, including processing federal tax returns, passport applications, unemployment insurance, or disability claims. One of the principal reasons federal agencies cannot process these services timely is the continued prevalence of legacy IT systems. According to a GAO report, such systems range from 8 to 51 years old and cost agencies over \$300 million to operate and maintain each year.⁶¹ Indeed, a group of federal IT leaders claimed that “reliance on – or integration with – legacy technology is the number one factor in failed citizen service initiatives.”⁶²
- **Policy and process complication (red tape):** Whether it is burdensome applications, redundant paperwork, outdated data collection methods, or poorly designed visitor spaces, the inefficient program policies and processes used to deliver services produce slow and poor customer experiences. In fact, one scholar referred to the sheer number of rules and red tape in government as a “menace” because it is so expensive and slows things down.⁶³
- **Staff shortages:** Federal agencies continue to deal with staffing and skills shortages. Part of this issue is due to limited appropriations and unpredictable budget cycles, but the federal government’s hiring and firing process is also notoriously slow, and turnover is high. Both issues affect staffing levels and performance, which in turn affect service delivery quality and speed.⁶⁴
- **Limited measurements for timeliness in service delivery:** Rather than focusing on timeliness from the customers’ perspective (i.e., the speed in which customers get what they need), federal agencies often focus on internal cycle times (e.g., backend, program-oriented actions, such as closing a case). This approach may be changing due to recent guidance from OMB requiring federal agencies to make use of web analytics, but many agencies are not currently utilizing vital customer-facing digital metrics, such as transaction completion time, page load time, “rage” clicks (when users repeatedly tap or click an element on a website or app), and abandonment rate.⁶⁵ Without systematic measurement and ranking of agencies and the publication of this information, agencies will continue to do what they have always done.

International Examples

Compared with the United States, many other developed countries have made progress in modernizing and expediting their service delivery through digital technology. With a human-centered and digital-first approach, these governments are at the forefront of providing their constituents and customers with quick, efficient access to services. For example, the current average waiting for a passport in the United Kingdom is around 12 days.⁶⁶ In Australia, it is 10 business days, and in Canada, it is between 10 and 20 business days depending on how it is submitted.⁶⁷ The standard processing time listed for a Danish passport is 3 to 5 weeks, still much faster than the standard 10 to 13 weeks (or even the expedited 6 to 8 weeks) in the United States.⁶⁸ Furthermore, as the prior section references, customers in many countries experience no time burdens for filing taxes.

In fact, through data sharing, well-designed websites, and automation, some international governments are evolving their customer interactions to be so fast and frictionless that they are becoming “invisible.” Customers benefit automatically from services with limited or no

interaction with government.⁶⁹ The following international examples demonstrate the kind of digital service delivery American policymakers and federal leaders should aspire to.

- **The European Union’s “ask once” or “once-only” policy:** The “once-only” principle means customers supply information only once to a government agency. Agencies are permitted to share this data with other agencies and across borders so that no additional burden falls on customers. This policy approach expedites access to public services.⁷⁰
- **South Korea’s “Digital Platform Government”:** A full-scale, government-wide initiative that leverages evolving digital technology such as AI and cloud computing to create a “one-stop government that breaks down the barriers among ministries [and] provides integrated, personalized and preemptive services from the public’s perspective.”⁷¹
- **Estonia’s electronic ID (eID):** Implemented over 20 years ago and with over 99 percent of the country now enrolled, Estonia’s eID—in conjunction with the secure data exchange, X-Road, and national portal, eesti.ee—allows citizens and residents to quickly access a vast array of services, including voting online, signing contracts, and retrieving health information.⁷²
- **Singapore’s “smart nation” initiative:** In 2014, the city-state launched this initiative to develop a fully digitized country, including a digital government, society, and economy. The effort is infrastructural in scope, with the goal of improving people’s lives by using digital technology to provide “inclusive, seamless and personalized” services.⁷³ Singapore’s 2022 citizen satisfaction rate with government digital services was 84 percent.⁷⁴
- **United Kingdom’s GOV.uk:** The Government Digital Service launched GOV.uk in 2012 to provide customers with a single point through which to quickly access federal services and information online, including renewing vehicle taxes, confirming bank holidays, and finding a job.⁷⁵ Prior to GOV.uk, federal services were scattered across hundreds of websites, forcing customers to contend with inconsistent guidance and varied user interfaces.⁷⁶

RECOMMENDATIONS

Customers expect federal service providers to be efficient given what they experience with private sector services. There is simply no reason federal services should not be simple, quick, and easy. This report explores a few key examples that are representative of the federal government’s current struggles in meeting those expectations, and how there are common-sense actions that OMB, federal agencies, and Congress can take to both reduce delay in federal service delivery and improve customer experience overall.

OMB and Federal Agencies:

- **Modernize websites and digitize forms:** Websites are the new door to government. As this report highlights, federal websites and digital services offer inconsistent and varying user experiences that are generally worse than those of the private sector.⁷⁷ While OMB recently released guidance to help federal agencies implement 21st Century IDEA, it should require agencies to adopt the USWDS to build and standardize “accessible, mobile-friendly government websites.”⁷⁸ 21st Century IDEA also prioritizes digitizing

forms and broadly supports converting slow manual processes to faster digital services. In alignment with the law, federal agencies should be converting manual steps (e.g., fillable PDFs that need to be handed in, printed photos, phone calls that end in answering machines, etc.) into end-to-end digital services.

- **Replace slow and costly legacy systems:** Each year, the federal government spends around 80 percent of its IT budget on maintaining legacy systems.⁷⁹ As both the tax filing and passport examples in this report demonstrate, outdated technology contributes to growing backlogs and slow service delivery. Replacing such systems should be a top priority for federal agencies to become modern, digital-first service providers, particularly as back-end technology needs to scale as agencies add more front-end digital services. With scalability and computing in mind, federal IT modernization efforts should also prioritize cloud migration. Cloud computing not only allows for improved data management and security, which in turn accelerates the adoption of AI and automation, but also frees up federal IT staff to focus on other digital transformation efforts as the cloud service provider takes care of regular maintenance and updates.
- **Embrace innovative, emerging technologies:** Services such as filing taxes and obtaining a passport take longer because agencies do not have a quick way of processing and confirming a customer’s identity. Technologies such as digital IDs and facial recognition address this challenge and have been proven to help expedite service delivery.⁸⁰ Similarly, generative AI offers federal agencies opportunities to improve and expedite digital services. A generative AI virtual assistant can take data and information from the IRS and work with an individual’s questions and responses to construct answers and provide guidance that is tailored to that individual’s circumstance. Compared with traditional phone calls that often result in long wait times, these chatbots offer 24-hour support, connecting customers to agencies through mobile devices, desktop computers, and phones.⁸¹
- **Collect data on service delivery from the customer’s perspective, including speed:** In support of the PMA priority to improve customer experience, OMB should require agencies to track and report metrics on service delivery speed from the customer perspective. This approach means measuring end-to-end time spent to receive a particular service, from initiating a passport application, printing a photo, and waiting in the office to receipt of the book. For example, OMB could measure service delivery time for the top 25 or so most popular federal services, determine what the actual or optimal time should be, and then hold agencies accountable for delay. Furthermore, agencies should leverage tools such as Google Analytics or the federal Digital Analytics Program to better understand where delays may be occurring in digital services.⁸² Such tools capture “hidden” operational and functional data, such as visits, time spent, and abandonment rates on particular webpages.
- **Modernize culture and approach to service delivery:** Digital transformation is not about an organization applying digital technology to existing processes. Digital transformation means adopting digital technology to improve and transform how an organization performs business functions and delivers services. Federal agencies should challenge existing notions of what service delivery means in the digital era, raise expectations to the level of the private sector, and implement internal processes—such as agile, product

management, and service design principles—that allow them to truly transform. This mentality means abandoning procedures, rules, and other red tape that are risk averse and slow service delivery.

Congress:

- **Pass the Legacy IT Reduction Act:** First introduced in 2022 and recently reintroduced in June 2023, this legislation “aims to reduce the Federal government’s reliance on legacy IT systems by requiring federal agencies to inventory their legacy IT systems and develop concurring modernization plans.”⁸³ These outdated systems inhibit service delivery speed, and it is vital that agencies replace them.
- **Modernize federal IT procurement and implementation:** Federal procurement rules are currently aligned with outdated processes for pre-digital capital projects and tied to inflexible contracts.⁸⁴ In the digital era, federal agencies need to be able to procure services and technology quickly to better support customers. Modern approaches to software development that utilize service design and product management cannot be tied to prescriptive requirements that do not allow for user research, adaptability, and continuous improvement. Congress should pass legislation, such as the Advancing Government Innovation with Leading-Edge Procurement Act, that improves how the federal government acquires and builds technology.⁸⁵
- **Reform government hiring and firing:** Improving federal service delivery means holding agencies and individuals accountable for their performance. However, civil service rules make it hard to fire federal employees for poor performance. If the federal government wants to compete with the private sector in customer experience, Congress should amend civil service rules to allow agencies to hold federal employees accountable for poor performance. Similarly, these amendments should also allow federal agencies to quickly hire new employees, particularly those with the technical skills to help accelerate digital transformation.
- **Allow agencies to increase fees for certain services:** Certain federal services that are business-like, such as patents and permits, are suitable for increased standard and expedited fees. If agencies can increase fees, administrative processes could be completely self-supporting and not dependent on congressional appropriations. Fees for such services should cover the cost of needed staffing and support upgraded IT systems in order to minimize processing times.

CONCLUSION

Tax filing and passport processing are well-known, visible examples of the federal government’s struggles in providing timely services to customers. Unfortunately, both examples are also representative of many other federal HISPs in a delay government—from backlogs with patents and veterans’ claims to lengthy asylum processes and unclear guidance for small business loans. In the digital era, federal services continue to offer a substandard customer experience that is slow and frustrating because of a continued overreliance on paper, manual processes, ancient legacy IT, bad websites, and insufficient timeliness metrics. Prior administrations and Congresses have made (limited) efforts to remedy these issues, but such efforts clearly have not been sufficient.

Nowadays, customers expect easy-to-use digital services that can be accomplished quickly on both the customer side (e.g., completing an end-to-end passport application online) and the agency side (e.g., internal technology and processes that get a passport to the customer in days rather than months). The IRS, State Department, and other federal HISPs increasingly have the political capital and budget to invest in digital technologies that hasten and improve these critical services. OMB and federal agencies should aggressively invest in digital transformation—including modernizing websites, digitizing forms, replacing legacy IT, and adopting emerging technology—as well as improve how they measure service delivery timeliness and adopt a culture that is less risk-averse and more adaptable to delivering services in the digital age. Congress should support agencies by passing legislation that enables and funds digital transformation, modernizes federal IT procurement, and allows agencies to hold employees accountable for their performance.

America’s peers around the world are making sweeping changes to deliver fast federal services in a digital-first, customer-centered manner, and it is time that the United States caught up with other best-in-class digital governments.

About the Author

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