An AI Aspiration to Transform Government Services

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IMAGINE IF...

… critical government services reached people seamlessly in the moments that matter most. For example, after a hurricane that destroys a family's home, an application for disaster assistance could rely on information they've already shared with government. It would be easy for them to grant permission to use that information, and to have confidence that it would be fully protected. And that one simple action—rather than completing multiple forms—would provide not just disaster relief but make it possible to recommend other benefits this family in distress needs, from disaster food assistance to local support. And at its core, critical government services reaching people seamlessly and securely means families get back on their feet faster.

Today

Americans spend billions of hours each year completing confusing and burdensome paperwork required to access vitally important government services. That number is too high, and federal agencies are working hard to reduce these unnecessary administrative burdens, with notable successes, as part of their efforts under the Executive Order on Transforming Federal Customer Experience. Even so, different services and benefits can require separate processes and forms, run by a mix of agencies and bureaus and offices, and each distinct effort can take days, weeks, or longer to be filed, approved, and delivered. This can not only cause unnecessary delays in accessing needed services, but also risks eroding trust in government.

Fortunately, agencies have worked in recent years to address these unnecessary burdens. By redesigning services to be more human-centered, increasing cross-agency collaboration, modernizing systems, and implementing new digital tools, government has made significant progress in improving service delivery. However, the rate and scale of government service delivery improvements remain hampered by siloed data, a long legacy of paper records, IT infrastructure that requires modernization, and privacy policies that vary across services. All of these barriers slow down government's ability to deliver simple, seamless, and secure government services to all Americans, regardless of need and ability, in the moments that matter most.

If the federal government already has much of the information required for individuals to access services they need and qualify for, what would it take to reduce burden on the public while maintaining government's commitment to rigorously protecting privacy and maintaining individual autonomy over personal information?

AI opens the door

The introduction of AI technologies changes the conversation about what is possible in the world of government service delivery. Paired with lessons learned from efforts to redesign services, modernize systems, and break down government silos, AI brings the opportunity to transform government service

delivery in years, not decades. If implemented correctly and consistently with applicable law, emerging AI and automation technologies that are becoming increasingly commonplace in the private sector, such as large language models, recommendation engines, and personalization algorithms, can help to expand the potential of government service delivery. For example, large language models could help government make better use of insights and feedback it already receives from individuals via surveys and call centers, making it possible to more comprehensively and quickly understand the public's challenges and enable data-driven prioritization for improvements. Recommendation engines, informed by sample- or population-level insights, could help to proactively identify and offer opportunities for relevant services and benefits, while accommodating and upholding personal choices related to accessibility, communication, and privacy.

While responsible use of AI tools offers the possibility to help government services to more quickly and accurately connect with the individuals they are designed to reach, this possibility can only be realized if government continues to rigorously protect privacy and effectively modernize IT systems. Recent advances in privacy-preserving technology, paired with modernized systems, streamlined data structures, and statistical methods, can also enable government agencies to more effectively deliver services and benefits. These advances could make it feasible to perform analyses across agencies without explicitly sharing data, enabling recommendations and predictions to be made for populations or communities without revealing potentially-sensitive, individualized personal details to any one agency. Through intentional implementation, consistent with applicable law, government can take advantage of these innovations while upholding its responsibility to rigorously maintain privacy and strengthen the public's confidence and trust in government.

The work ahead

In addition to modernizing systems, prioritizing higher-quality data, and strengthening our privacy frameworks in relation to AI technologies, it will be critical for federal agencies to demonstrate their ability to implement AI in a way that protects individual rights and privacy. Through AI implementation efforts, like the Department of Veterans Affairs using AI to analyze free-text veteran feedback, government can quickly learn, iterate, and refine approaches to using AI that can enable a more effective, human-centered, and privacy-protecting future of service delivery.

Federal agencies could use focused pilots within the context of life events widely-experienced by members of the public, such as being laid off from a job or recovering from a natural disaster, that often cause a need to access multiple government services, which may require interacting with multiple agencies, offices, programs, and processes. These pilots could identify and act on opportunities where more mature AI technologies could be applied in low-risk use cases throughout the service delivery journey, with the goal of reducing unnecessary burdens experienced by the public and government employees. For example, AI could be used to develop first drafts of public-facing websites, helping to bring information to the public at appropriate reading levels and in multiple languages, making it easier to understand how to access critical services. Throughout the pilots, the iterative incorporation of customer feedback should be prioritized, and best practices related to data standards and methods for cross-agency collaboration should be documented so that they can be shared across government, making it easier to scale AI implementation as more and more agencies become ready to do so.

Major hurdles and societal risks

As government works to embrace AI, rigorously managing individual privacy, data, and security must remain at the core of the work, which will require thoughtful engagement with the public and experts alike. Additionally, building a modernized and strengthened foundation of data infrastructure will be a significant and long-term effort, as many systems and data remain limited in their ability to support the full potential of new AI technologies and tools. As services and systems are redesigned and modernized, incorporating feedback and input from members of the public—of all needs and abilities—will be critical to ensure that

innovation doesn't further exacerbate existing inequities related to ability, digital connectivity, or other characteristics. Finally, it is essential that government continues to build and measure public trust and confidence in government's ability to execute effectively on its mission.

A transformative national capability

Better government service delivery is not just about simpler forms, pre-populated data, less time spent on hold, and the responsible use of taxpayer dollars—though all of these benefits are meaningful. Transforming government service delivery is about bringing relief —not stress—after a hurricane, making it easier to access support after having a child, and providing a simpler world to navigate as someone retires. Most importantly, it's about earning and maintaining public confidence so that government can be trusted not only to deliver on our commitment to protecting privacy, but also to effectively meet needs through critical services and benefits. In the grandest sense, reimagining service delivery is about government having the capabilities to match our ambitions. And with the arrival of AI, our ambitions can be bigger than ever.