A New Research Agenda to Drive Government Transformation

By Daniel Chenok

In 2018, the IBM Center for The Business of Government will mark its twentieth year of turning research into action to help improve government. Given this significant milestone, it's time for the Center to reinforce its ultimate mission: to assist public sector executives and managers addressing real-world problems with practical ideas and original thinking to improve government management and leadership. For almost two decades, the IBM Center has supported leading researchers to identify trends, new ideas, and best practices—crafting approaches that support government leaders in addressing mission delivery and management challenges with strategies and actions that promote efficiency and effectiveness.

The IBM Center has now released a refreshed set of priorities for future research that address key challenges and opportunities facing the public sector in the next several years, reflecting input from a broad cross section of current and former government leaders, industry and nonprofit stakeholders, and academic experts. Based on this new research announcement, forthcoming IBM Center reports will continue to provide insightful findings and actionable recommendations for government leaders and public managers.

Our research addresses the following areas of interest:

Insight—Using data, evidence, and analytics to create insights that influence decision-making, actions, and results

Policy-makers, agency leaders, and frontline staff regularly find themselves having to make sense of data and information, drawing out insights to inform decisions. The language around performance-related data in government decision-making has evolved over the last quarter of a century, which today includes constant references to "evidence-based" decisions, "strategic analytics," and "data-driven" reviews of progress. In addition, policy-makers in recent years have promoted more use of "open data"—both within and outside government. At the same time, evolving technologies have reduced the cost of collecting and reporting such data. Yet the original challenge remains: how can government make sense of vast and growing amounts of data in a way that informs better decisions?

Multiple approaches exist to address this challenge, including processes for transforming data into actionable insight, increasing the availability of data, pursuing evidence-based policy initiatives, and building analytic capacity to act on evidence. Agencies can embed these approaches in their reform plans and budget requests. To achieve the goal of a government that uses data to extract insights for better decisions, researchers can help public leaders and stakeholders better understand and adopt promising practices. Such studies can drive data and analyses that help support policy or program decisions that measurably improve government operations and results.

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Agility—Adopting new ways for government to operate, using Agile principles, and putting user experiences and program results at the forefront

Given the pace of change across all facets of society, government must keep abreast of inevitable shifts in the economy, advances in technology, and increases in citizen expectations. Government often appears slow to adapt, while citizens expect services that mirror their experiences with the private sector. Agencies can accelerate change by adapting "Agile" methods from the field of software development. Agility across public sector operations can improve program management and ultimately help achieve mission outcomes. Approaches that demonstrate how to embed agility into agency cultures and improve the way government operates will add value to citizens in the future.

Research can help leaders and stakeholders understand promising strategies and practices. A shift from a linear to a more interactive approach to developing and delivering programs represents a significant shift in policy, culture, roles, and responsibilities, as well as program oversight. By understanding Agile techniques and identifying and overcoming potential obstacles, agencies can embed agility in how government works on behalf of the public.
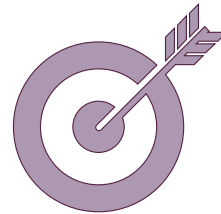
Effectiveness—Applying enterprise approaches to achieve better outcomes, operational efficiency, and a leaner government

The goal of making government more effective, both in terms of its operations and results, has had bipartisan support across multiple administrations. Many governments have introduced initiatives to improve operations, including the adoption of enterprise approaches to delivering mission-support services seamlessly across program and organizational boundaries. In addition, bipartisan initiatives to expand the use of data and evidence, such as those explored by the Commission on Evidence-Based Policymaking, have led to more rational resource allocation decisions. As noted in the IBM Center report, *Building an Enterprise Government*, the future of government performance relies not simply on greater efficiency, but on increasing the capacity to work together effectively from an enterprise perspective to improve operations. This can be a result of action taken by leaders from the top down, and by practitioners who collaborate across networks from the bottom up.

Cross-boundary challenges facing government today rarely fit into neat bureaucratic boxes, and often require cross-boundary responses—compelling government to build such capacity to reduce costs, increase efficiency, and streamline citizen services. Research into enterprise approaches that leverage modern management and technology systems, and practices can enable progress across the public sector.

Risk—Mitigating risks, managing cybersecurity, and building resiliency to meet the mission of government

The safety and security of the nation face threats from an array of hazards, including acts of terrorism, malicious activity in cyberspace, pandemics, manmade accidents, transnational crime, and natural disasters. Federal agencies must stay ahead of these risks and mitigate their impact in order to carry out missions successfully. In addition, government leaders responsible for managing complex and high-risk missions must address and mitigate internal threats.

Within this context, government leaders operate within an environment of increasingly intricate and complex systems. Devices have become smarter and more connected to the external world. In this environment, government leaders must build the capability and capacity to identify, understand, and address risks and potential threats. Assessing, responding to, and mitigating the inherent risks facing the public sector—both physical and online—can promote effective management of programs and missions. It can also facilitate the successful transformation of operations.
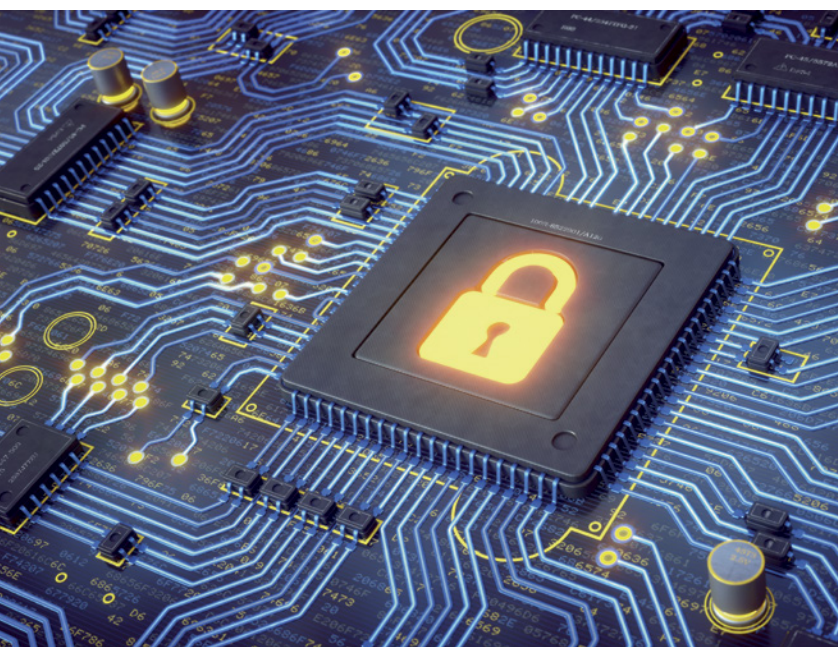
Federal executives must understand the spectrum of risks, develop actions to mitigate them in compliance with law and policy, and communicate risk response strategies to appropriate target populations. All of these steps are key elements of enterprise risk management.

More importantly, assessing the inherent risks facing the public sector, and acting accordingly, can drive change in government and promote sound management of government programs and missions. Public sector leaders need research that points to understanding and applying a set of tools and techniques, and adapt them to their specific operating environment, based on best practices and lessons learned in addressing common as well as unusual risks. Enterprise risk management is not simply a compliance exercise—it goes to the core of agency mission delivery.

People—Cultivating people; reforming processes for hiring, developing, and retaining workers; and leveraging data and technologies to build the workforce of the future

Many disruptive forces and trends changing the way government does business impact those charged with executing the business of government—the workforce. Government workers play a critical role in meeting mission and achieve outcomes, even as rapid change affects the workplace, workers, and work itself. Government must reform its human capital processes to meet the new demands of the digital age.

Building the future workforce represents a strategic priority for all levels of organizational leadership. Recognizing this reality also points to a new kind of dynamic, team-centric, connected government workforce. One where leaders and staff keep pace with technology, adapt to the disruption of the digital economy, and recognize that shifting demography calls for new ways of leading.

Enabling this new type of government leader involves research on how best to build and grow talent with a serious focus on talent management, leadership development and succession planning to prepare for workforce transitions. Tomorrow's leaders will also benefit from ideas for revamping antiquated HR practices to meet the needs and expectations of a changing workforce—and to compete successfully for new recruits. Success rests on creating a culture that values and engages people in meaningful ways while leveraging technology, data, and new processes to improve operations.

Engagement—Fostering a citizen-driven government through real-time interactive feedback, data visualization, and other tools to engage, co-create, and co-produce services and programs

Public sector organizations face challenges in how best to harness the potential of citizen/customer engagement. With citizens increasingly receiving an outstanding experience from the private sector, they perceive a growing gap between expectation and experience from government.

To close this gap, agencies must look to transform the design of services, the allocation of resources, and the models used for measurement and accountability. Moreover, government leaders must integrate user experience to guide all citizen interactions. Citizens are looking for new opportunities to engage with governments on how to approach problems, develop policies and programs, receive services, and create collaborative online and in-person relationships. Digital services, cognitive solutions, and open approaches to technology and data can create channels that bring the two parties closer together. This fosters a "citizen-driven" government based on real-time, multi-party communications to develop programs, as well as personalized transactions in receiving services.

Research into new technologies and innovative processes can help government transform and expand engagement with citizens, businesses, nonprofits, and other stakeholders. Government leaders will benefit from an understanding of how engagement comes from more than simply making

a mobile app or updating a website. It comes from an understanding of program design and execution that meets end-user needs in how they wish to interact. Finally, key to understanding the impact of this trend will be the collection and analysis of data and metrics to assess progress.

Digital—Optimizing new technology and infrastructure models, focusing on the user experience, and incentivizing innovators to modernize how government does business

In general, governments have followed the private sector in adopting digital technologies and new ways of doing business. Today's digital challenges involve more than putting information up on the web and creating secure transactions for citizens and businesses. Digital governments can now leverage the promise of open networks in the cloud. Given the technological advances such as mobility, cognitive computing, and the Internet of Things, mechanisms now exist to collect, distribute, and access vast amounts of data in various formats from a variety of sources. All of this can help government leaders make better decisions.

The digital revolution can enable the transformation of government in multiple ways. Successful digital organizations in government will leverage new technologies and drive the modernization of IT. The digital government of the future will no longer simply automate previously manual processes. Rather, citizens will help drive agencies to modernize, and agencies will work together to integrate systems and applications across platforms. They must collaborate to build the modern infrastructure needed to support digital government efforts. They must also leverage the federal government's buying power to enhance service quality and reduce costs.

Research can help define opportunities to drive efficiency, effectiveness, and performance improvements. Public sector leaders will look for ideas on how best to harness the power of technology to help create a twenty-first century digital government—one that focuses on meeting the challenges of today while seizing the opportunities of tomorrow.

Conclusion

These seven drivers draw on significant insights shared during a research roundtable in spring 2017 that brought together government, academic, industry, and nonprofit leaders. Through research into these areas, the IBM Center will continue to help communicate what leading experts know about effective practices and lessons learned to government leaders and stakeholders.

Governments in the U.S. and across the world will continue to focus on controlling costs while improving the performance of their operations. Driving meaningful and sustained change in government requires innovative, effective, and efficient decision-making. It requires the implementation of positive, significant, and lasting results.

We look forward to continued collaboration with academic and nonprofit experts around the world in releasing reports that address these imperatives. ◻