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8 traits of future-fit agencies
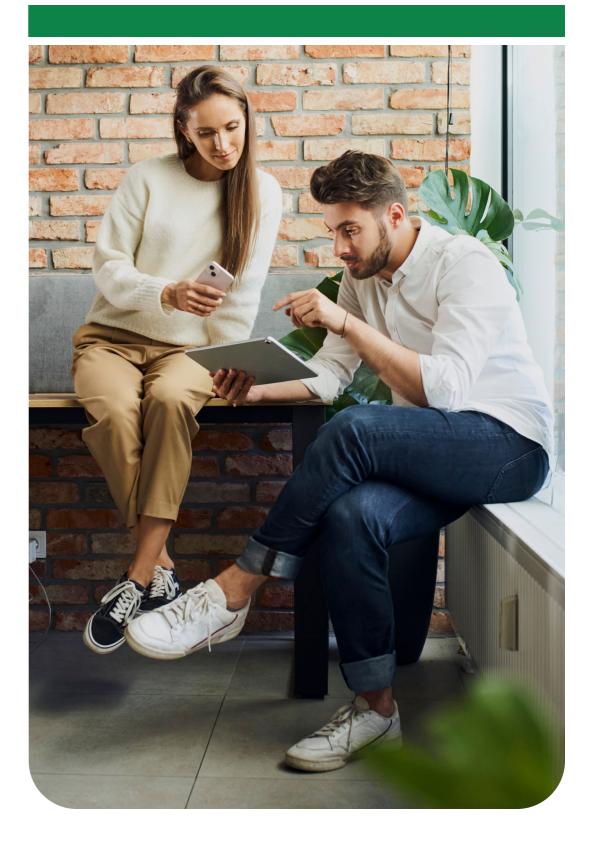
Contents

Introduction

Government agencies are at a tipping point. Citizen expectations are evolving. Employee demands are shifting. And traditional ways of working are quickly growing inefficient and obsolete.

To overcome these challenges and thrive over the long term, government leaders and future-fit agencies are taking what they've learned during the pandemic to drive further modernization and transformation. They're looking forward, breaking down the operational practices for mission delivery and reapplying learnings to drive innovation.

Shedding the constraints of legacy systems that can inhibit change, agile agencies are integrating future-proof technology that can more readily adapt to fast changing economic, social and regulatory dynamics. They understand that the right application of digitization, automation and modernization can mean the difference between efficient mission delivery or backlogs in today's volatile world.

Future-oriented agencies have learned the importance of the service experience and speed of delivery from tech giants in the private sector. They are also looking beyond their own four walls to identify and provide services in a way that meets and exceeds the expectations of citizens.

Let's explore eight traits of future-fit agencies — and what holds some organizations back from achieving the highest levels of digital transformation.

What inhibits agencies from transformation

Why do some agencies struggle to follow the lead of forward-looking agencies, or even to lead with innovation themselves? It's not from a lack of desire or, in many cases, not even a lack of funding or resources. Instead, lagging agencies often feel overwhelmed by the prospect of modernizing their systems. They often take a wait-and-see approach, moving reactively only when systems are already at risk because they fear disruption. In the age of digital government, doing nothing is no longer an option.

Let's explore the drivers that lead to stagnation and how agencies can overcome them.
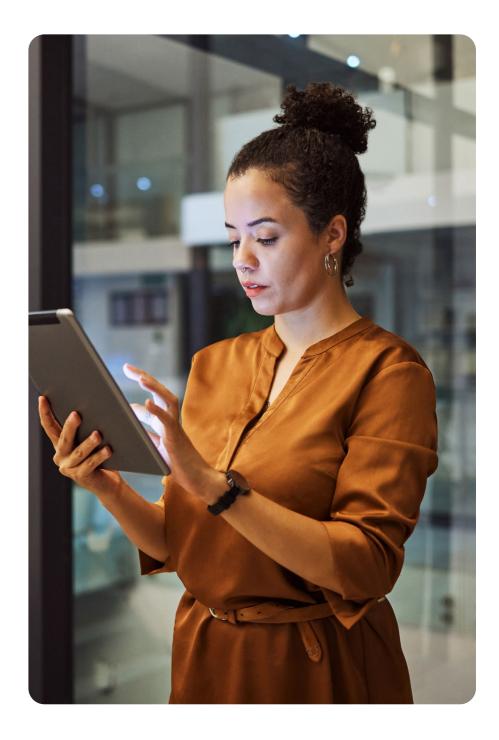
Challenge #1:

Legacy burden

There is probably no greater impediment to innovation in government than legacy thinking. Initiatives may be met with responses like, "We've always done things this way" or "We can't do that because we're different" or "If it's working, why change it?"

Like legacy thinking, legacy systems can be a major impediment to innovation at all levels of government. These systems are costly to operate and maintain and limit the modernization needed to meet the demands of today's hyperconnected citizens and employees.

Continuing to rely solely on legacy platforms also presents the risk of exposing security vulnerabilities that have been hidden or overlooked. As skill sets evaporate due to retirement and attrition, fewer individuals have the awareness of where these vulnerabilities lay and the risk they present. Consequently, costs will increase as scarce knowledge resources become more expensive to recruit and retain.

But the reality is that legacy systems remain in place because it's the path of least resistance in the short term. It's often easier and cheaper to do nothing or simply continue to plug the leaks in the proverbial dam — even though the choice could lead to long-term ramifications. Busy agencies don't always have the budget, time or resources to completely replace their existing systems.

Luckily, many powerful solutions can integrate with legacy technology and core systems. They can connect all the important information your staff needs to do their jobs quickly, accurately and efficiently — without the cost or downtime associated with heavy rip-and-replace initiatives.
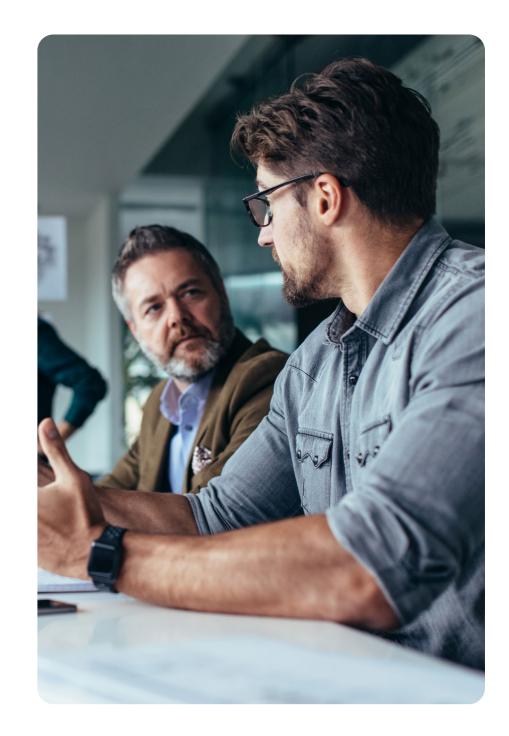
Challenge #2:

Growing pains

Organizations around the world are tapping into the "API economy" to help boost agility and speed of service delivery. Application programmable interfaces (APIs) help developers access government information and services from their websites and applications. This strategy is intended to improve their communications with and responsiveness to the public.

When these systems were built years (or even decades) ago, they were intended as standalone applications. Development methodology at the time involved incorporating all conceivable functionality into a single, monolithic code base.

This old-style thinking made those applications very rigid and inflexible. With all functionality tightly intertwined, even the most minor upgrades or modifications required extensive amounts of time, money and resources. Agencies also had to worry that a change in one part of the application might break something in another part.

Developers may have envisioned that these applications would need to communicate with other applications within the department, but never envisioned the day when they would need to communicate with service providers outside the firewall. Many agencies struggle to make their own systems communicate, much less extend that communication to third-party providers.

Lagging agencies can emulate forward-thinking ones by evolving from a product mentality to a platform mentality. They can look to break down their applications into services exposed through APIs. Forward-thinking agencies adopt a "Lego" approach to constructing applications. As agencies modernize to an API-first methodology, they gain the ability to quickly and efficiently integrate virtually any service that is also exposed as an API and isolate any instances where security vulnerabilities might be exposed.

Challenge #3:

Increasing volume, types and size of information

Many agencies have learned that the promise of a single repository for all their content and information is a myth. Information resides all over the department in volumes, types and sizes never seen before. This spike in content can largely be attributed to the fact that today there are more than 7 billion mobile phone users in the world.

The amount of information agencies store, ingest and create is staggering, and it exists across the enterprise in multiple systems and repositories. Finding, retrieving and creating actionable insights from information is a task where traditional ways of working fall short. Having the information is important, but if staff can't locate it when they need it, it's essentially useless.

Agencies are ready to abandon the costly rip-and-replace method, constantly swapping one repository for another, and embrace a future of federated search. This will empower today's agencies to leverage information where it resides, through technology connecting disparate information repositories. The net result: A single point of access to all information, regardless of volume, type, location or size.

> It takes a different mindset to overcome these barriers to digital government. What's next are eight traits demonstrated by future-fit agencies and why their adoption is critical to mission delivery in the digital age.

Trait 1: Practicing first-principles thinking

When lagging agencies create service solutions, they often take something that was previously built or designed and add to it year over year — sometimes even generation after generation.

The end result does the job but is likely inefficient and expensive to maintain. This leaves the question: Does anyone have any idea why we're doing this? When agencies build solutions on top of outdated systems, iteration is confused with innovation.

First-principles thinking reworks the problem from the ground up.

To truly empower digital innovation, you must go back to the fundamental assumptions, or "first principles," to develop new products and solutions unencumbered by what has been built in the past.

For government, a first-principles thinking approach starts by asking, "What problem am I trying to solve?" or even, "If someone were digitizing government today, what would it look like? How would it be different? Would we still use paper-based, email and spreadsheet processes the same way?"

Reinventing an entire highly regulated industry would be a monumental undertaking unlikely to occur any time soon. Still, some agencies have disrupted certain components of traditional government by throwing out the old rule book.

In 2017, the federal government launched Login.gov, a single sign-on service that allows citizens to sign into multiple agencies using a single username and password.[i] Some states have introduced the ability for residents to seamlessly and securely add their driver's license or state ID to their Apple iPhone and Apple Watch.[ii] And King County, Washington, tech officials worked to reimagine the city's services in equitable ways, including accessible online applications for reduced transit fares, which then increased 2,000% among underserved populations.[iii]

> Now is the time to build on this momentum to truly evolve into digitally enabled organizations and meaningfully transform government's relationship with residents.
>
> Center for Digital Government[iv]

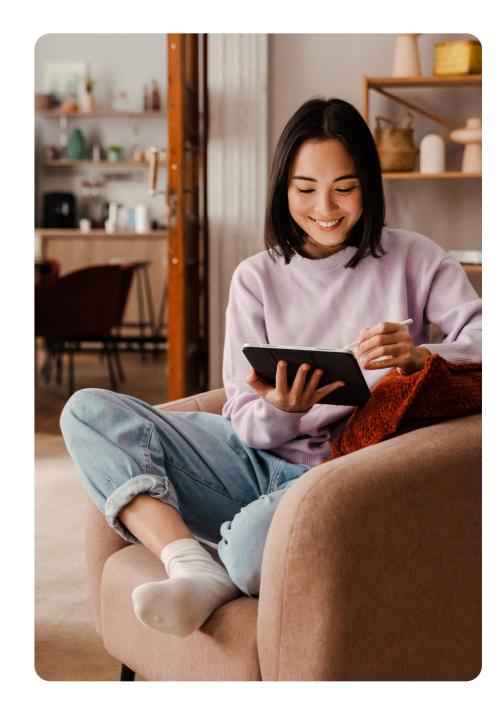# Trait 2: Preparing for the hyperconnected citizen

Today's citizens are hyperconnected. They are engaged in an omnichannel, always-online experience via mobile phones, desktops/laptops, wearable devices and connected cars; cloud-based voice services like Alexa and Google Assistant; and social media apps like Facebook, Instagram and X (formerly known as Twitter). Because they are constantly connected, they expect immediate responsiveness and gratification.

Some agencies may believe that simply delivering a mobile app will address this need for innovation. But placing a new veneer on top of an antiquated set of applications is not going to meet the demands of the 21st-century constituent.

An old adage says, "If you automate a bad process, all you end up with is an automated bad process!" The same holds true when delivering modern citizen interactions. By delivering mobile applications without a modern infrastructure or information systems to support it, agencies are simply iterating on a service model that wasn't meeting the needs of the citizen to begin with.

Much like a new structure built on a crumbling foundation, agencies often face disastrous results by exposing system weaknesses across new channels that demand more of legacy systems than they can deliver.

Future-fit agencies meet the real-time demands of the hyperconnected citizen with a robust architecture of high performance information systems capable of scaling to evolving modern demands. Their focus on modernizing infrastructure establishes a foundation from which to drive true innovation.

Trait 3: Doing more with less

Organizations around the world are often asked to do more with less. The government sector is no exception. Despite increasing workloads, budget constraints and fewer resources, agencies still need to deliver quality service and work toward mission delivery.

In challenging times, antiquated processes and mind frames can grind innovation and agility to a halt. The COVID-19 pandemic proved that pivoting to new ways of working required a certain level of digital maturity to continue serving the public during lockdown. Only agile organizations could continue serving the public in an efficient, responsive manner. Those that relied on inkand-paper, in-person-only interactions struggled.

However, doing more with less doesn't have to mean working longer and harder. To better prepare for whatever the future may bring, future-fit agencies look to analyze and implement innovative ways of extending the return on investment of their existing infrastructure and resources.

Utilizing technology that allows citizen development, like rapid application development frameworks and low-code/no-code functionality, is one way modern agencies can improve service quality in times where demand is high, but capacity is low. With these capabilities, agencies can quickly adapt to the needs of their constituency and employees, like providing hybrid and remote work models and omnichannel experiences.

Trait 4: Following best practices from the private sector

The differences in serving the private and public sectors are stark. In the private sector, companies compete on price and product in a market driven by profitability. There is no such competitive backdrop for the public sector. But one facet of service that the two sectors share is aiming to continually improve the experience they deliver to their stakeholders. For private companies, that's consumers, customers and investors. For government agencies, that's the citizens you serve.

When it comes to experience, no one has created more disruption across all industries than the tech giants (Google, Amazon, Apple, Meta). Companies like Amazon have redefined the customer experience, raising the bar for all interactions.

Forward-thinking agencies know that citizen experience is a critical component of mission delivery. Agencies that endeavor to create user-intuitive, streamlined experiences will cultivate deeper engagement and foster trust in government services.

Delivering a positive constituent experience requires changing culture — evolving from a transactional service approach to one that focuses entirely on the citizen. It requires a complete view of the citizen's journey, not siloed views through disparate functions. To accomplish this, future-fit agencies break down the barriers preventing them from delivering citizen-centric service.

They also break down the barriers to information scattered across the agency. High-quality citizen experience can only be delivered with a holistic view of the data, processes and information gathered at every stage of the journey map.

> Today, government agencies don't just need a website. They need to be available at City Hall, through the Amazon Echo, on a responsive website and through a kiosk in a grocery store — they need to be available everywhere at any time.

Dustin Haisler
e.Republic's Chief Innovation Officer[v]

Trait 5: Accelerating mission delivery

One of the primary challenges that agencies can face in delivering a positive citizen experience is an inability to quickly adapt to changing global or social dynamics. Constituents who obtain real-time or near-real-time responsiveness from the likes of Google and Amazon have come to expect the same from their government.

Citizens no longer differentiate between the private or public sector. A positive experience received in the private sector is now expected from government agencies. Digitally empowered agencies have learned to move fast to adapt to shifting citizen preferences, quickly changing regulatory environments and adoption of the latest technologies. They are quicker at delivering individualized attention and at satisfying citizens' requests for service.

Agencies can no longer take months or years to introduce new digital services to their constituency. Likewise, they can't take hours or days to respond to service requests. In an age of instant gratification, with high expectations from a citizen who shows little tolerance when those expectations go unmet, speed of answers and service are defining tomorrow's government.
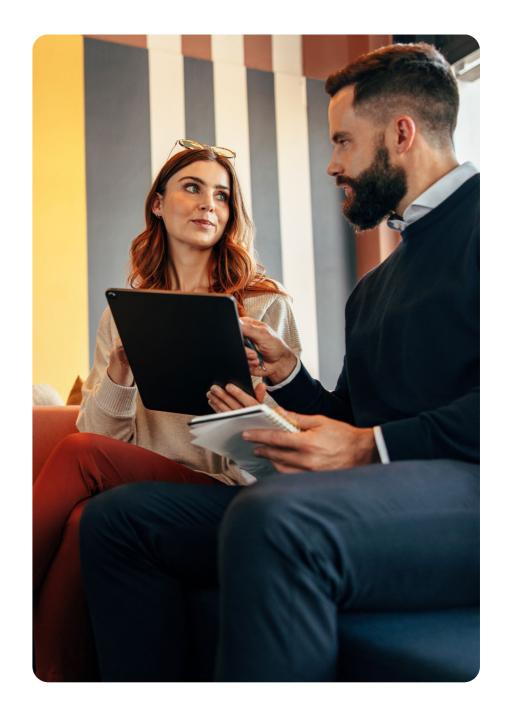
Trait 6: Working smarter, not harder

Modern agencies focus on speed and efficiency. They know they can't scale productivity effectively by throwing more workers at outdated or manual processes. Agencies must operate lean to bring down operating costs, but they can't sacrifice service quality or mission delivery in the process.

The knowledge base for decision-making is declining as government employees age out of the workforce or leave the private sector voluntarily. This can be detrimental to service quality and constituent engagement. And in especially challenging times — like economic recessions, natural disasters and health epidemics — the amount of information that agencies must evaluate, manage, share and store skyrockets. As a result, service response times can slow to a crawl.

At a time when almost a third of the federal workforce is within seven years of retirement, today's agencies are looking to work smarter, not harder, in the face of constrained resources and skill sets.

Agile agencies rely on process automation to capture decades of intuitive knowledge held in the minds of an aging workforce. They augment those automated processes with machine learning (ML) and artificial intelligence (AI) to reduce or eliminate low-value, mundane manual tasks and enable straight-through processing. The role of AI and ML, and tools such as robotic process automation (RPA), isn't to completely remove human touch points from all government interactions. Rather, these new technologies complement human interactions where they provide the greatest efficiencies, freeing up employees for more value-added work.

Trait 7: Embracing information everywhere

"Water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink." In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Samuel Coleridge was talking about a thirsty sailor, but the saying could be applied to government's challenges in managing the flood of content and data pouring in and out of agencies.

Yes, it's there, and yes, there is a lot of it. But exactly where it resides, how to search and retrieve it and how to turn massive stores of content and data into actionable information ... the answers to these questions may elude many agencies today.

Forward-thinking agencies embrace the fact that not much can be done to prevent the proliferation of content and data repositories across the organization. Rather than accepting that all information must exist within a single repository, these agencies embrace the disparity of data and content across departments and have learned to leverage information "where it lives."

Despite decades of attempting to consolidate disparate repositories of information, future-fit agencies understand that this level of control is often out of their hands. New sources of needed information can emerge through executive mandates or new legislation and regulatory bodies.

Innovative agencies are looking to federation services as a means of connecting its staff to the data and content they require, wherever it resides. They also look to enhance and expand the descriptive information associated with that data and content to gain greater insight and better serve citizens.

Trait 8: Future-proofing the organization

Many government departments struggle to keep their core systems relevant and up to date in response to mounting pressure and ever-evolving regulatory requirements. Many core systems are decades old and were never designed for the flexibility or adaptability needed today. Expensive and difficult to maintain, these monolithic systems can force agencies into periodic, lengthy migrations in which entire core systems are upgraded, replaced or rebuilt from scratch. This can be a source of significant disruption. In most cases, not long after the system has been replaced, the agency finds it is once again obsolete, and the costly process repeats.

Future-fit agencies leverage systems assembled from individual functional services. This modular approach provides an expedited way of modifying existing applications as well as quickly assembling new applications as needs arise.

Applications built on services exposed through standardized programming interfaces allow agencies to effectively "future-proof" their applications. As individual services become obsolete, agencies can simply replace that service with minimal impact to the overall system — and far less disruption to service delivery.

Furthermore, because digitally empowered agencies have broken down process functionality into granular services, those services can be reused in new applications, greatly reducing the amount of time needed to deliver new capabilities.

Conclusion

Agencies face a number of challenges today. The public sector is a massive and complex entity, regulations continue to expand and a higher demand for increased privacy are just a few of the factors influencing the evolution of government. But most importantly, citizen preferences have changed.

Today, citizens expect a frictionless, information-rich experience that leads with mobile but ultimately is channel agnostic and seamless. Digital-savvy millennials have overtaken baby boomers as America's most populous generation, and they demand speed and convenience in meeting their needs.[vi] But many agencies continue to rely on legacy systems that are slow, inefficient and make service delivery difficult.

Future-proofing with modern applications while reducing reliance on legacy systems is how agencies can keep up with citizen and employee expectations and better deliver on their missions.

It will take a different mindset to achieve complete digital modernization — one focused on starting with the larger problem that needs to be solved. It will also require the ability to find new ways to extend service value outside the firewall. Those who succeed will deliver a superior citizen experience and will deliver it fast. They will leverage the technology of process automation and AI to make better decisions, increase efficiency, enhance citizen engagement and ensure high-quality service over the long term.

About Hyland

Hyland is a leading intelligent content solutions provider that enables thousands of organizations to deliver better experiences to the people they serve. Our solutions help every level of government — federal, state and local — meet today's challenges of modernization, information governance and citizen engagement while laying the foundation for simplified, streamlined and digital government. Hyland has provided intelligent content solutions to government agencies and departments for more than 30 years and is relied upon by more than half of the Fortune 100.

Explore Hyland's government solutions.

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