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## Ways to Put AI Into Action

When people describe AI as a transformative technology, they usually think about its potential benefits or outcomes and often forget that such a leap in capabilities might require their own transformation also. They might need to rethink their approach to daily work or managing agency operations.

At a recent GovLoop event, thought leaders from government and industry discussed how agencies can accelerate their efforts to put AI into action. Here are highlights from those conversations.

1

### Take a People-Centric Approach to AI

People often ask if the workforce is ready for AI. But the real question is, is AI ready for the workforce, said [Brian Morrison](#), who recently retired from the Air Force's Chief Data and AI Office. He believes the technology should be straightforward enough that people don't need training.

"In the military, we like to say, 'Everybody fights a war on Microsoft Office,'" Morrison said. "Why? Two things: It's everywhere and it's so simple to use." AI tools must be similarly ubiquitous and intuitive for government to widely adopt them.

### The participants:



**Amy Hamilton**, Visiting Faculty Chair, Department of Energy, National Defense University (NDU)



**Rhett Krulla**, Chief Technology Officer, Homeland Security Division, Microsoft Federal



**Manuel Xavier Lugo**, CAPT, SC, USN, Head of AI Initiatives and Capability Delivery, and Task Force Lima Commander at the OSD Chief Digital and Artificial Intelligence Office



**Brian Morrison**, Large Language Model Specialist, Department of Air Force Chief Data and AI Office (Retired)



**Gaine Nazareth**, Solution Consulting Leader – U.S. Defense Department, ServiceNow



**Nick Psaki**, Federal Principal Technology Strategist, Pure Storage



**Stephen Tuomey**, Data Center Compute Executive, Dell Technologies



**Mark Wheeler**, Director of AI, Data & Analytics Center of Excellence, General Services Administration (GSA)

He recommends adding new tech in small increments to help people acclimatize to it.

"That's the trick," he said. "We turn a training problem into an acquisition problem. I simply look for a tool that employs technology in a way that is so simple anyone can use it, and then do it over and over. It's not about taking giant leaps; it's about taking small stairsteps."

## 2

### Let AI Lighten the Workload

While agencies explore a wide range of AI use cases in the next few years, individual employees can start using AI now to make their day-to-day work easier, said [Rhett Krulla](#) with Microsoft Federal.

For example, while preparing for a conference last year, Krulla spent several hours thinking of questions to incorporate into his presentation before deciding to see what Microsoft Copilot, an AI-based digital assistant, would suggest. In about 20 seconds, “it spit out a list of about 10 different questions that were all very similar to what I had just spent four hours creating,” he said.

AI can be especially helpful when integrated with other personal productivity tools, such as email, calendar, chats and word processing. At the beginning of each week, Krulla asks Copilot to summarize and prioritize his tasks for the week. Training can help, but “the first thing we need to do is start using it ... and find new ways in which we could use it more effectively for our daily needs,” he said.

## 3

### Optimize Processes, Not Just Tasks

Agencies can use AI to automate or improve any number of tasks, but many are part of larger processes, said [Gaine Nazareth](#) of ServiceNow, which provides a cloud-based platform for managing digital workflows. It doesn't help to accelerate individual tasks if the overall process — for example, for employee onboarding or delivering a service — is not seamless.

This is one of the areas where AI can make a big difference, Nazareth said. “You can use AI to look into bottlenecks and gaps and to understand different patterns, and then based on that, optimize your processes,” he said.

To get started, organizations should conduct a process inventory to locate pain points, Nazareth said. That can involve methodically reviewing the performance of key program processes and interviewing key subject-matter experts. “For the most part, there's no one size that fits all,” he said. “Every organization is different.”

## 4

### Get Serious About Cyber Awareness Training

Until recently, many phishing attacks failed because they just weren't convincing: An email purporting to come from a senior leader wouldn't be written in such stilted prose or contain so many grammatical or spelling errors, for instance. Unfortunately, hackers have learned to use generative AI (GenAI) to clean up their act, said [Amy Hamilton](#) with NDU, and with the backing of nation-states, they are launching these smarter attacks on a large scale.

That makes cyber awareness training more important than ever, she said. Employees must learn the more subtle indicators that an email might be a phishing attack, such as the lack of encryption buttons and “all the kinds of things that the cybersecurity nerds are constantly telling you to look for,” Hamilton said.

The newest generation of employees — Generation Z — are digital natives, so they are more prone to click on links without thinking about the risks, she said. “They are technology-empowered, but they are not technology-aware,” Hamilton said, and that must change as AI becomes more pervasive and the risks increase.



## 5

## Control the Data AI Can Access

AI must feed on great volumes of data, but there should be guardrails on what data AI can access, said [Stephen Tuomey](#) with Dell Technologies. For instance, if you give an AI program that's focused on helping users with IT issues unfettered access to all the agency's data, that AI could expose private salary details that only a finance team should see.

Think about it the way you organize items in a kitchen pantry, he said. Things that are safe for everyone go on the accessible bottom shelves, while dangerous products that only adults should touch, such as cleaning supplies, go higher. AI is like children, and "if you give them access ... to the bleach and the cleaners ... you're making a trip to the emergency room," said Tuomey.

A good data governance system is vital. It recognizes that "not only do I have a big, gigantic [repository] of data, but I need to lock it down, so that certain aspects can be [accessed] or not," he said.

## 6

## Extend Data Governance Beyond Core Data

Governance strategies can ensure data integrity, security and proper management, but they have a weakness, said [Mark Wheeler](#) with GSA: They often ignore unstructured data. "Governance programs were developed to typically just think about the administrative datasets, the [enterprise risk management] systems and other things," he said. "But we all know that's not the limit."

There also are PDFs, Microsoft Word documents, emails and presentations, and today GenAI extracts those formats from multiple network locations when delivering its results, Wheeler said. "All of the unstructured data that we have in our shared drives, our project drives, [Microsoft] OneDrives, Google Drives, whatever they are, will now be accessible."

That calls for a holistic governance structure covering all data repositories, he said, and agency leaders must commit to good data governance early on. Private- and public-sector tools are available to help, he noted.

## 7

## Investigate Updated Storage Options

AI has changed the nature of data storage, noted [Nick Psaki](#) of Pure Storage. Although earlier machine learning algorithms merely analyzed existing data, AI generates new data — a lot of it.

Even training an AI model can multiply the amount of data by up to 100 times the original dataset's size, he explained. And there will be thousands of such models, if predictions of its potential growth are accurate. "Where are you going to store all that? Hard disks are about as useful in an era of artificial intelligence as tape libraries [are now]," Psaki said.

Existing data centers are stressing local power grids as they struggle to support AI's massive needs. "How do we transform [where] data lives ... to make sure that our data doesn't consume all of our resources? These are things we have to balance at a foundational level," he said.



## 8 Expand Your Imagination

Many of the early use cases for AI focus on improving employee productivity, especially with administrative work, said Manuel Xavier Lugo of OSD. That's understandable, but it reflects a lack of imagination, he said. "We're only looking at this technology in how it helps me do my current work. We're not thinking about, how does it traverse to a new way of doing work?"

For example, most online queries rely on the browser model, in which you enter search terms and get back a variety of resources to explore. But GenAI can take it further, presenting a synthesis of all results that's essentially a sentiment analysis, added Xavier Lugo, who is also a Navy captain.

In the next five years or so, he sees the use of AI expanding in three stages or epochs:

- **Epoch 1:** Users interact with digital chatbots through traditional prompts.
- **Epoch 2:** Users ask questions, and GenAI converts those questions into technical queries.
- **Epoch 3:** Users continually "converse" with their full range of systems.

Before the emergence of smart devices not long ago, this vision would have seemed futuristic, but that's no longer the case.

"The point is, we're conversing with machines all the time, but in this case, it's conversing with your machine for effect," Xavier Lugo said. As these capabilities develop, "we have to start thinking in a more imaginative way."

