

AI Is Already Changing Government

Artificial intelligence (AI) is here and now, but its role in government might not be obvious. At a recent GovLoop roundtable, we asked government and industry experts where and how AI is making a difference.

Speakers:

Winston Chang

Chief Technology Officer for Global Public Sector, Snowflake

Randal T. Cole

Deputy Chief Data Officer, Department of the Navy

Kevin Walsh

Director, Information Technology and Cybersecurity, Government Accountability Office (GAO)

Kathryn Wetherby

Deputy Director, Marketplace IT Group, Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services (CMS)

Practical Applications

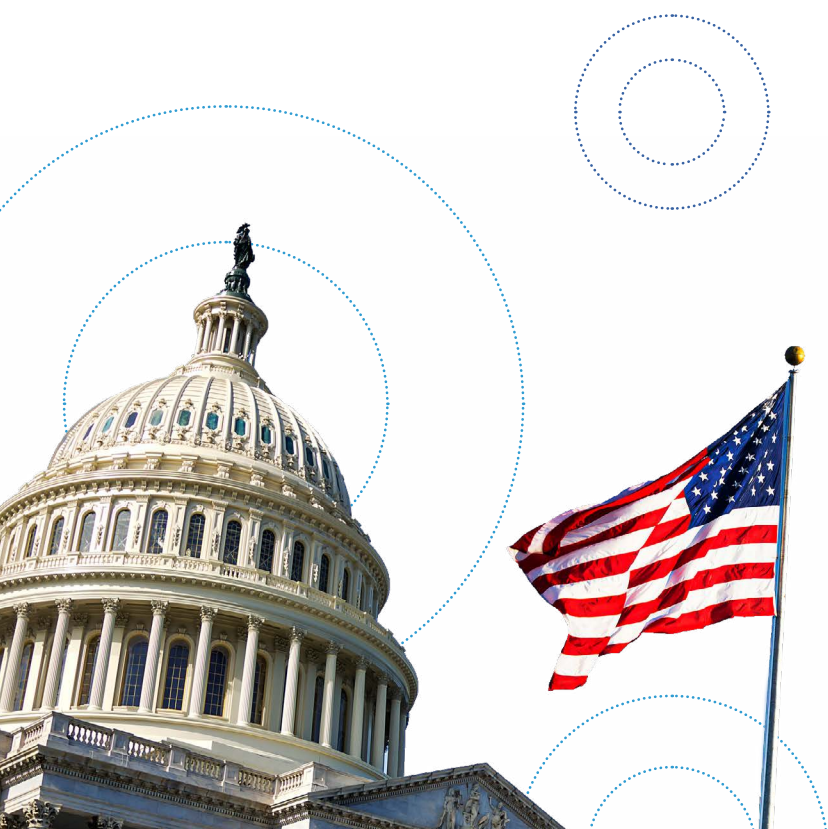
The media is full of exciting stories about what AI could do, but most of what the technology is doing right now is more mundane. That doesn't diminish its impact, however.

GAO surveyed 23 agencies in 2023 regarding their use of AI. "There were 1,200 current and potential use cases in government," said GAO's Kevin Walsh, and civilian agencies are using 200 to 300 of them now.

For instance, the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration is using AI to help with seabird counts, and NASA is considering AI that helps rovers choose targets on other planets to investigate. "Anywhere you see large quantities of data, that's an opportunity for [AI]," Walsh said.

At CMS, "our use cases are in the operational side of the work," said Kathryn Wetherby. "How can we use AI to take the people out of things?" For example, AI helps with service desk tickets by checking that they're complete and returning them to the sender for any missing information. "If I can relieve people from checking the tickets ... then they can really be technical people and dive into problems," Wetherby said.

CMS focuses on using AI to improve existing systems, because in government it's essential to keep things up and running. "I can't just [say,] 'Oh, we tried this thing and it didn't work so we're just going to pull down this program for a little while.' That's not how it works," she explained.



Data Is the Driver

One thing is clear as AI grows more familiar: It's only as good as the data it runs on. That's pushed data quality and management into the spotlight.

"At this phase, we have to look at all the data we have and what we are collecting, and assess what we can actually use AI on," said Winston Chang of Snowflake.

"The data quality is key," agreed Walsh. Government has "rafts of datasets," he said, "but what's the quality of [that] data?"

For the Navy's Randal Cole, data quality ties back to mission. "We're looking to tackle [the issue of] what data is important and what data do we need that we're not collecting," he said. "And that comes back to very basic things. What are we supposed to be doing? Why are we supposed to be doing that? Laying it out in a form so that we can understand the high-priority dataflows."

An essential facet of data management, especially for government, is ethical use. What's collected, how it's collected, where it's stored and how it's used all need to be evaluated through that lens.

"I technically have access to a lot of people's data," Wetherby noted. "It's important for us, as good stewards, to know what we're using data for, where it's going, how it's being housed, making sure that it's not going into commercial [large language models (LLMs)]. It's very important that we know all the ins and outs of our systems."

Design Around Data

In an AI-driven world, data may even be an organization's most important asset, according to Chang, so it's crucial that agencies become more data-centric.

"If we know data is our most valuable asset, and we are building our organizations around the workflows that come off the data, the analysis that comes off the data, then the processes [and] operations [of the] organization need to be designed around how to maximize that value of that data," Chang said.

That also changes what agencies will need from — and for — their workforces.

One problem in hiring and retention, according to Cole, is that the AI agencies are using isn't the stuff of science fiction. People completing training programs who have "stars in their eyes" and hope to work on "the next Terminator" won't be satisfied with improving the process for service desk tickets, he said.

That's one reason to invest in existing staff. "I'm upskilling as many people as I can," said Wetherby. "Part of this is retraining them about data. The agency has to be super involved in why we need to structure the data this way, why it's important to have the data."

For Chang, the issue comes down to making data literacy universal. Whereas 30 or 40 years ago, job applicants might put proficiency with Microsoft Word or Excel on their resumes, now that skill is assumed. He foresees the same thing happening with data literacy. "We'll get to a point where every executive assistant is data literate," he said.



The Human Element

But even as organizational roles change in response to AI, there's still a vital place for humans. AI only identifies and replicates patterns: It doesn't really have its own ideas. It can't think of something new.

Using AI to draft policy, for example, risks limiting the possibilities, Cole cautioned. "There's tons of policies out there, and we're training [LLMs] on that corpus of policies. I'm wondering if we're focusing in on our own thinking too much. If the AI simply comes in and reproduces that, where does innovation ever come in?"

Chang also sees a danger there. "We [could] lose our diversity, our edge case, brilliance, innovation that humans have." Those things are essentially outliers in statistical models, which push everything toward the middle, he said. "That's probably my biggest fear, the loss of unique ideas and diversity in thought."

Making sure we don't cede too much decision-making to our automated analysts requires mindfulness of how we apply and manage AI.

"It's a real question," Cole said. "You don't want a situation where people are not in the loop and have systems making life-or-death decisions."

"It feels like we're on the precipice," Walsh said. "We're looking at this and [deciding] how to proceed. The decisions we're making now and in the next year are going to have massive ramifications."

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