Learn How to Embrace Disruption and Be Better for It



Transformation initiatives are inherently disruptive, in that they purposefully change how people do their jobs. Although such change is intended to be a net gain for employees, it's not always perceived that way.

But while people often talk about disruption as if it were a bad thing, that doesn't always add up. As Damien Eversmann, Chief Architect for Education at Red Hat, points out, "nobody ever excels by maintaining the status quo."

At a recent GovLoop virtual event, thought leaders from government and industry offered practical suggestions for how agencies working at the intersection of technology and management can make change less disruptive — or make disruption less alarming. Here are some of their ideas.

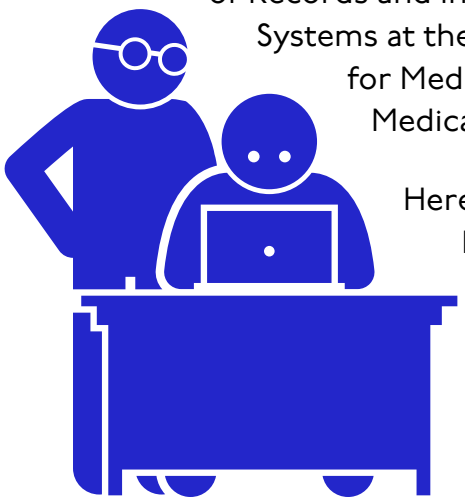
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How to Get Buy-In for Transformation

A critical part of managing a transformation initiative is managing the expectations of the organization.

The challenge is that transformation, by its very nature, entails change, and you need key people at every level of the organization to be advocates for it.

"It's very important for you to communicate, not only to your staff about this change, but to communicate to your stakeholders about our program change," said Susan Little, Director of the Division of Records and Information Systems at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.



Here are three human factors to consider:

Training and other resources: As you introduce technology that changes how people work, you need to make sure your staff is equipped to use that technology. For example, as CMS transitions from paper to digital records, the agency needs to ensure that records specialists understand the technology and that IT specialists understand the unique requirements of records management policies and processes, Little said.

Human resources requirements: As technology changes the way people work, your agency might need to review and revise key HR processes, from writing job descriptions to setting performance goals. Those processes might be more involved if employees are part of a union, she said.

Leadership alignment: You need to ensure that the end goal supports the larger mission and goals of the top leaders. "You can't do transformation like this in a vacuum," Little said. "You have to understand how what you're doing aligns with their higher-level leadership perspective." Showing that alignment will make it much easier to get the funding you need for training and other resources, she added.

How to Adopt a Modernization Mindset

One of the drawbacks of the traditional "big bang" approach to modernization is that it is inherently disruptive, bringing inordinate stress to all the people, processes and systems involved.

A better process is what you might call "continuous modernization," said Eversmann of Red Hat, which provides enterprise open-source solutions and tools.

Rather than trying to change everything everywhere all at once, you may look to make small tweaks and changes as you go along. In this way, you make change just part of the culture and even unexpected change will be seen as less disruptive, he said.

Eversmann highlighted three dichotomies that frame the continuous modernization mindset:



Change as norm vs. change as rule: One university study found that students were more likely to conserve water if they were told the benefits of conservation (e.g., it helps with campus beautification projects) than if simply told that conservation practices were required, Eversmann said. In the same vein, you want employees to understand the benefits of continuous change, rather than just expecting them to go along with it.

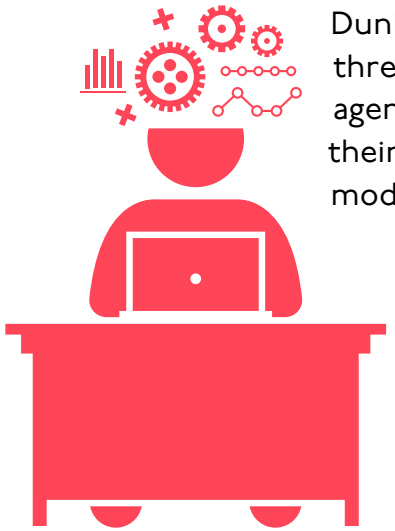
Robustness vs. resilience: People often talk about the value of resilience in the face of change, that is, the ability to return to normal after disruption. But a better goal is robustness, Eversmann said. "Resilience is branches growing back from a tree after a storm," he said. "Robustness is branches flexing and weathering a storm." Again, when change is part of the culture, people will become more adept at weathering disruption.

Objectivity vs. subjectivity: One of the reasons people resist change is that they fear losing their "pet" projects. That subjective response, while understandable, often doesn't serve the needs of the organization. When people have a mindset of continuous modernization, they take a more objective view of what needs to happen, Eversmann said.

How to Move Modernization Forward

Something's got to give. Agencies can't keep taking the same approach to modernization and expect to get different results.

"I think we all know the traditional way that we buy, build and operate software, really hasn't worked for us," said Ann Dunkin, Chief Information Officer at the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE). "It takes too long, it fails too often, it costs too much, it usually doesn't meet user needs when you're done and frequently it ends up not being very secure."



Dunkin highlighted three ways in which agencies can shift their culture to make modernization easier:

Adopt new development and operating methodologies. Methodologies reflect the values of an organization, and values are the heart of culture. Consider Agile development. As originally formulated more than 20 years ago, the Agile Manifesto emphasizes the importance of ending up with working software over adhering to predetermined processes. "It's about building something that works, then documenting it, rather than documenting what you need and trying to build it," Dunkin said.

Get creative in developing the workforce. When it comes to IT and cybersecurity, new hiring authorities can help, but they only go so far. You also need to keep investing in your employees so that they learn new skills to meet the needs of the mission. DOE, for example, has created a technology internship program in which participants work for 10 weeks a summer, for up to three summers, in high-demand fields such as cybersecurity and IT.

Embrace new procurement methodologies. In the early days of the pandemic, DOE and other agencies "demonstrated that we can deliver services fast, we can deliver them online and employees can work from anywhere," Dunkin said. "We made about a decade of progress in a few months." While that happened as a matter of necessity, such agility is still feasible. In particular, DOE has taken advantage of cloud's ability to provide DOE offices with speedy access to innovative tools, she said.

How to Empower Employees to Embrace Change

Initially, transformation initiatives are driven from the top down, with leaders and managers laying out the goals and strategy for an initiative and expecting employees to get behind it.

But to move the mission forward, agencies need to empower their employees to become agents of change, said Amy Haseltine, Deputy Assistant Commissioner for Acquisitions in the Office of Information Technology Category in the Federal Acquisition Service at the U.S. General Services Administration.

"The good news is that technology, and a commitment to technology modernization, can support how we tackle change while preserving our commitment to the foundational tenets that anchor us as public servants," she said.

Haseltine came up with a framework she calls "Steam Ahead" that captures those foundational tenets:

- Safe, secure and sustainable infrastructure to facilitate the exchange of information and the delivery of mission outcomes
- Tools and technologies executed in these processes, driven by law and regulation, that facilitate transparency in our work
- A business ecosystem designed to deliver results in an effective and efficient manner
- Accountability to constituents and to the wide array of stakeholders associated with an agency's work
- Mission modernization

"Mission is our foundation, and leveraging modernization is a means to make it happen," Haseltine said. **"Adopting a cultural mindset in which we understand the risk associated with change, and strengthen our risk appetite to embrace and grow with change, is vital."**

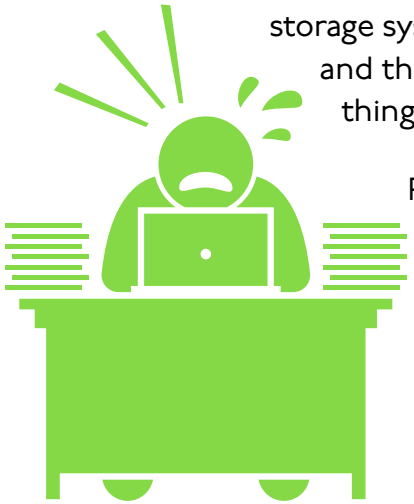


How to Manage Your Data Footprint

As organizations work to adopt sustainability goals, they are taking aim at a major energy consumer: the data center. But do a little more snooping, and you find a more specific culprit: data storage.

Storage systems account for between 45% to 65% of data center energy costs, said Nick Psaki, Principal Technology Strategist for U.S. Federal at Pure Storage.

One problem is that hard disk drives have many moving parts, so they throw off a lot of heat. Put multiple storage systems in one place, and the cost of keeping things cool just soars.



Psaki suggested a three-pronged approach to improving the efficiency and sustainability of your data center:

Leverage advanced storage capabilities. Flash storage changes the equation. Flash technology has no moving parts (i.e., it's nonvolatile), because it stores data in memory, not on physical disk drives. Also, flash storage is much denser, meaning it can store the same volume of data in a smaller system. "Flash-based systems simply consume 90% to 97% less electricity to store the same amount of bytes in a tremendously smaller footprint," Psaki said.

Have clearly defined goals for managing data. The main reason organizations buy flash storage systems is performance: Flash provides much quicker access to data than traditional hard disk drives. But which data sets require that kind of performance? And which can be stored in lower-cost, high-volume storage systems? "We need to look at: How do we put our data in the best possible infrastructure to obtain its value?" Psaki said.

Have a data service infrastructure that lasts. Buying data storage should not be like buying a car, where you swap out an old model for a new one on a recurring basis. Instead, you want a modern platform that can evolve in place as the technology evolves and as your requirements change.

How to Unleash Your Workforce

When Alex (Crump) Smith became the Chief HR Officer for the city of Memphis in 2016, much of the HR processes were paper-based. Those processes were important and effective but also rigid.

"It didn't allow for the type of innovative thinking to evolve the way we were doing things to serve the citizen," Smith said. "How do we listen to what citizens need and want, versus just working through a process that we were taught?"

That all changed when the city began modernizing its systems, she said. "When we asked people to rise to the occasion, and to really think more innovatively and creatively about their work, we were able to see a windfall of innovation and collaboration among our teams," she said.

Smith recommended a three-step approach to unleashing innovation among employees:

Initial assessment. It's not enough to say that you need to digitize manual processes. Get more specific: Where are manual processes proving to be a problem? What processes or areas of the operation are burning for change? In the case of Memphis, it was about "really articulating the challenges with what we were being asked to do from the divisions," Smith said.

Focus on freeing up capacity. How can you bring in digital solutions that don't just change how people work but change their work for the better? In particular, how can you increase their bandwidth, giving them an opportunity to learn new skills and contribute to the organization in new ways? In doing this, you want to "show respect" for the work they have been doing all along.

Recognize and reward employees for growing on the job. The fact is, an organization grows when its employees grow. That includes both formal training or certifications, as well as just "moving forward with the projects and being able to bring things to completion," Smith said.

"All of these things coming together, I think, really help bring the culture change that's needed to make the organization better," said Smith.

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