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How CBP, DoD, USPS and VA transform services through human-centered design

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Reimagining government services through human-centered design

BY DAISY THORNTON

Customer experience increasingly counts as a critical factor in how the public measures the effectiveness of government services. Citizens expect the same seamless service they get from tech giants, and agencies are responding with smarter tools, better data and a renewed focus on user needs. This transformation is unfolding across sectors — from health records to post parcel logistics.

Today's public expects government services to match the speed and simplicity of tech giants like Amazon. They want services fast and intuitive, across whatever channels they feel most comfortable with. Agencies increasingly recognize that improving employee experience is key to delivering better service to the public.

"At the end of the day, it's all about the customer experience, and the customer's experience goes first. How the users go and how different generations are dictating those data interactions is where the agencies have to be," said Ken Gonzalez, director of solutions architecture connected experiences for [Verizon](#).

"I'm used to picking up the phone and trying to call and speak with everybody that I can whenever I'm trying to solve a problem. But some of our younger generations are really about: 'Let me see how I can get access to all the information that I need on my own. Only if I really need to, I will talk to somebody.' "

For agencies, delivering against mission means they must cater to multiple communication preferences, Gonzalez pointed out.

Gonzalez, along with leaders from the Customs and Border Protection, Defense Department and Department of Veterans Affairs, discussed tactics and technologies they're using now or plan to implement to deliver experiences for the public and federal employees effectively.

CBP: Building trust and efficiency at the border

CBP started focusing on customer experience (CX) about three years ago, said Janet Pence, director of CBP experience within the Office of the Commissioner.

With 67,000 employees, Department of Homeland Security agency is one of the largest law enforcement agencies in the world and the second largest revenue collector in the federal government, collecting duties, taxes and fees associated with merchandise both entering and leaving the country.

CBP also interacts with around 1 million passengers per day, which is why Pence said she decided to focus her efforts on two programs: the Global Entry program, and the Automated Commercial Environment for international goods.

"For the public, I think of experience as time back to life. A good experience with CBP is an efficient and an expedited experience," Pence said. "And when I go to airports now and I watch people coming in using Global Entry, a lot of times they'll come through and they'll say, 'Wait, that's it? I'm done?' And it's the delight on their

face that they've had a seamless, quick, efficient experience is just a beauty to behold. That's what we're really aiming for."

To achieve this CX, travelers can apply to become what's called a "known traveler." To do that, they submit information, go in for an interview, and CBP vets each individual. Travelers that CBP classifies as "low risk" enjoy expedited experiences entering the country.

But CBP isn't solely focused on CX. As Pence pointed out, her organization is called "CBP Experience." That's because it takes a holistic approach to experience, and that includes focusing just as much on the employee experience," she said. "For Global Entry, CBP consulted frontline employees to identify pain points affecting both travelers and staff."

Based on 119 recommendations from CBP officers, Pence's team identified ways to streamline the process and improve both customer and employee experience.

"Our initiative is to measure that time back to mission associated with technology insertions. We'll look at a process and measure the time we spend on the process. We'll insert a new technology, and then we'll measure again. And from that, we are able to get that numeric indicator of how much more efficient we have become," Pence said. "With a workforce of 67,000 employees, theoretically, if we save 1 minute per employee, that's a gain of 67,000 minutes. It adds up pretty fast across a large workforce."

Moving forward, Pence wants to foster what she calls a "grassroots innovation" environment. She's encouraging officers to use low-code, no-code tools to solve local challenges with tailored, agile solutions. Each port of entry and CBP hub has its own set of unique problems and nuances, so Pence aims to create "citizen developers" to pursue the solutions that make sense locally.

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Janet Pence
Director of CBP Experience,
Customs and Border Protection

DoD and VA: One federal electronic health record

Getting electronic health records to share between the departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs has been a CX challenge spanning decades.

Bill Tinston, director of the Federal Electronic Health Record Modernization (FEHRM) Office in the Joint DoD and VA Office, said it's because the challenge is about more than just the health records themselves. It's also about the benefits and experiences gained in DoD, and how those translate from active duty into the veteran experience.

"I heard an analogy yesterday that we have the Veterans Health Organization up on a mountain surrounded by a fence that is the IT systems, and we have DoD, the Defense Health Agency system, up on another mountain surrounded by their own IT fence," Tinston said. "Then, we ask the military members to take a bag of bricks and get over to the other side, and there's a massive chasm in between them. What we're trying to do as we deliver a single electronic health record is make that an easy transition."

What's more, the solution doesn't include just DoD and VA. The Coast Guard, as part of DHS, as well as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration within the Commerce Department, have also signed on, as well as a few other government partners, Tinston said.

FEHRM already has an integrated proof-of-concept site in North Chicago, at the Navy's Great Lakes accessions location, where recruits begin their training. That Illinois facility is VA-led but serves both veterans and military beneficiaries.

Today, the facility no longer recognizes beneficiaries as distinct from one another. It just views them as people.

Tinston said DoD and VA accomplished that by removing friction in basic services, like shared calendars and emails to enable patient-centric care. Then they followed with the Federal Electronic Health Record, replacing the Armed Forces Health Longitudinal Technology Application on the DoD side and the Veterans Health Information Systems and Technology Architecture and the Composite Health Care System at VA.

"It eliminated a lot of the friction, a lot of the brain power and personal effort that people needed to exert to operate as a team and allowed them to focus on the people they were serving," Tinston said. "So how does this become a user experience? It's because it improves the ability of that facility to focus on the people they're serving instead of making their processes from two different departments operate together."

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Bill Tinston
Director, Federal Electronic Health Record Modernization Office

"Preparation today is key to capitalizing on tomorrow's opportunities — even those we can't yet foresee. You don't know what those opportunities might be, but the key is preparing yourself today," he said.

"We will be focused on preparing ourselves, getting the data right, removing obstacles, making the IT recede into the background, and then we'll see opportunities we don't see on the horizon yet and we'll be able to capitalize on them. We're going to see technology, if we prepare ourselves — be it artificial intelligence, be it things that we haven't conceived of yet — drive us to an ability to focus on patients, customers, the Americans that we support with the federal electronic health record."

VA: Transforming the veteran experience

The goal is operational interoperability, he said. The idea is that the IT recedes into the background, and nobody really thinks about IT or talks about the tools anymore. This goes beyond data exchange, Tinston said. The overarching process enables caregivers to focus fully on their mission without being hindered by IT systems.

Over the next year, Tinston said VA intends to accelerate FEHRM deployments, with 13 sites including Alaska going live in 2026. The current focus? Preparing to seize unforeseen opportunities as they arise in the near future.

For example, how can FEHRM address the technological barriers that have challenged health information management for both Navy and Coast Guard service members, who often serve on ships. The answer, Tinston said, is to use satellite connectivity through Starlink. Soon, the Coast Guard will be able to take advantage of federal electronic health records on their ships.

The Federal Electronic Health Record isn't the only CX project in the works at VA. After serious, systemic problems with manipulation of patient wait times at the VA Medical Center in Phoenix and other facilities, the department created the Veterans Experience Office to redesign service delivery around veterans, said Barbara Morton, deputy chief veterans experience officer.

VEO's work started with human-centered design, specifically crafting a customer journey map. That helped the VEO team understand where to focus its resources to improve experience, Morton said.

Next, it created tools to gather feedback from veterans and operationalize that data. That involved a suite of tools, training, communications and products to empower frontline employees and deliver the best services based on what veterans need, she said. Many of these were low-tech, empathy-driven solutions designed to around the veteran rather than bureaucratic processes.

"That's been an incredibly successful program. Outpatient Trust, which we typically report, is now up in the 90s, 90% agreement, which is, again, an A. We aim for an A for those that we serve," Morton said. "And so that's an incredible proof of concept for us year over year."

Moving forward, Morton said VA is looking to get deeper integration of feedback from customers through channels like surveys, social media and contact centers, and layering that on operational metrics of performance. She said VA is also looking to leverage its data to implement AI and get better insights.

But the department doesn't want to lose sight of the need for empathy and a personal touch in serving veterans, Morton said. That's why improving contact center navigation and ensuring veterans get seamless support across channels are top priorities.

"My aspiration, my dream, is that veteran trust in VA continues to grow," Morton said.

"We've reached 80% a couple of times. We're now at 79%. I would love to see that continue to grow by leaps and bounds because ultimately to me that is our North Star measure — making sure that we center the person and deliver our services in a manner that is most efficient, effective and useful for them."

USPS: Telecom as a CX catalyst

Gonzalez said he sees common challenges across the initiatives from his perspective an industry partner that works with agencies to serve the public.

For example, handling and protecting data correctly, while still making it useful and accessible to the user is a universal challenge, he said. There needs to be alignment between how the end user needs to use the data and how technology delivers it.

One place Verizon has helped make that possible is at the U.S. Postal Service. USPS is a huge organization with many moving parts, and its services involve everything from citizens buying stamps or trying to find missing packages to USPS employees seeking support from the agency IT help desk. Gonzalez said the agency has around 11 different contact points.

"Obviously, the one that is the most visible is 1-800-USPS. We have taken them from a journey where we had that platform running onsite, and now we are pretty much about almost 90% done moving them to a cloud-based platform with benefits from migrating their computing and the elasticity," Gonzalez said.

"The Postal Service gets really busy at the end of the year. They have to handle a massive number of packets. But after Jan. 15, that goes down. So therefore, the benefits of the elasticity that the cloud can provide are major."

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Barbara Morton
Deputy Chief Veterans Experience Officer, Department of Veterans Affairs

That move to the cloud also allowed Verizon to introduce the Postal Service to AI, which provided other benefits, he said. For example, virtual agents can interact with customers on simple requests, saving valuable employee time. Or in other instances, new workflows speed information to the public and employees, Gonzalez said. Plus, these integrations become far more effective when moved from physical infrastructure to cloud-based platforms.

One thing Verizon specifically helped the Postal Service focus on is the implementation of omnichannel consistency and single authentication, he said. The idea is that a customer only has to verify who they are one time, no matter what channel they start on, and then seamlessly transfer to different channels. So if a customer calls into an AI agent, and then needs to elevate to a human, or starts in a text chat and has to move to voice, they are authenticated once, and don't need to do so again.

The big challenge here, Gonzalez said, is how to implement AI responsibly. Agencies need to validate that the AI models they use produce valid outcomes, especially when it's external facing.

AI is crucial to better experiences, but both customers and employees must understand how their data is used, how the models are implemented and how these new tools improve the experience, Gonzalez said.

"Let me put it this way: You may have a model that is providing a patient's information and may get it right 99 times out of 100. That's unacceptable. There is no margin of error when we're talking about human care. There's no margin of error when we are providing directions that are mission critical," Gonzalez said.

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Ken Gonzalez
Director of Solutions Architecture Connected Experiences, Verizon

"The way that we get there is by really collaborating and understanding data flows, taking the input where it's needed, and validating that everything that is done is really ready to be put in front of production. We have to make sure that we implement these technologies responsibly."

Read Verizon's "2025 CX Annual Insights Report" and discover trends about AI's impact on CX

The sources in this article shared their comments during a Federal Executive Forum, presented by Trezza Media Group.