Government Business Council

PLAYBOOK

SERVING THE PUBLIC

Insights on the Customer Service Landscape from Government Experts

Underwritten by:

DocuSign®

INTRODUCTION

Customer service has always been an important facet of the relationship between the government and citizens, but it is now more of a necessity than ever. In an increasingly digital world, private sector customer service relies on sophisticated technology to respond rapidly and effectively to the customer base. The public expects a similar level of responsiveness from its government. Events like the COVID-19 pandemic have also exposed some of the gaps in customer experience, forcing the public sector as a whole to reimagine what customer experiences with their agencies look like.

How do experts from the public sector feel about the current status of their customer service offerings? What are their biggest challenges? Where do they see gaps in their service, and what can agencies do to make strategic investments in the future of customers' experiences?

Government Business Council (GBC), the research division of GovExec, partnered with DocuSign to answer these questions and more through a survey of 200 federal and state and local professionals.

PURPOSE

With insights collected from government experts across federal civilian and defense and state and local agencies, GBC has organized the following playbook as a set of actionable takeaways for interested stakeholders. It aims to faithfully capture the current understandings and challenges facing public sector leaders as they look to improve their customer experience.
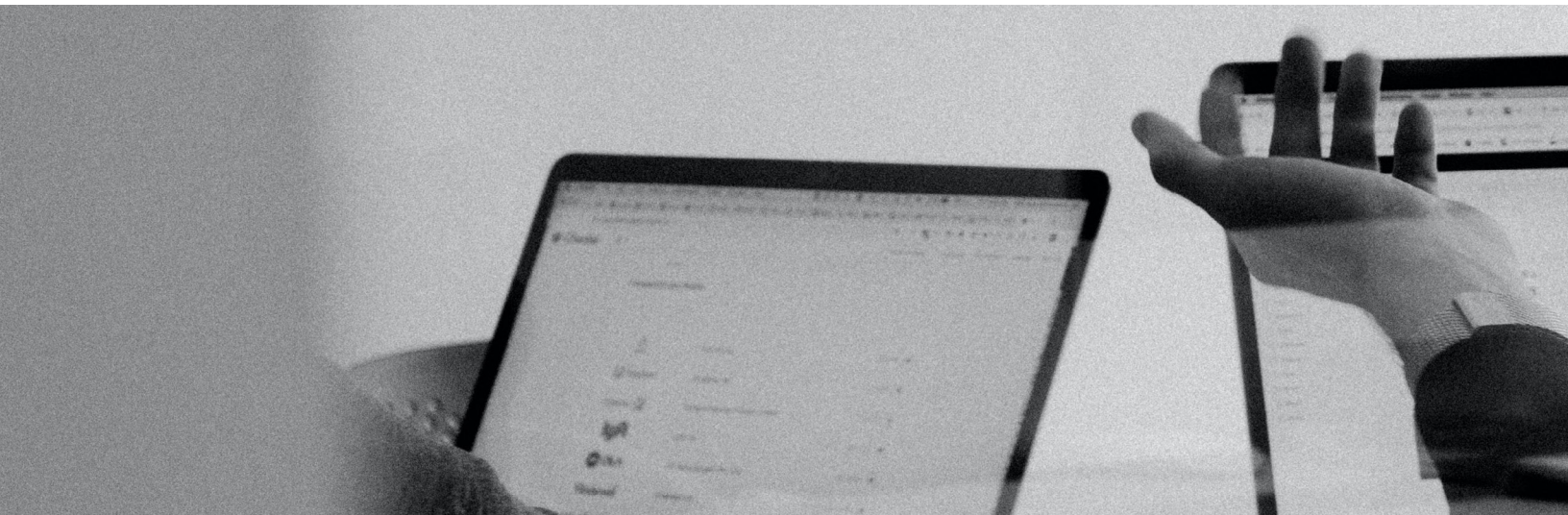
BACKGROUND

Customer experience (CX) with the government is not only important for general public satisfaction but is a key marker of public trust in the government. The American Customer Service Index, which measures customer satisfaction in government on key indicators like efficiency and ease of government processes, ease of accessing information, and perception of website quality, found that 63% of citizens were satisfied with federal government services. While a nearly two-thirds satisfaction rating is good, this number represents the fourth annual consecutive decline (from 70% in 2016). At the same time, 85% of customers expect government services to match or exceed commercial service providers.[1] This mismatch suggests there is work to be done. At a moment when just 20% of Americans say they trust their federal government,[2] it is more crucial than ever to build touchpoints that inspire confidence.

Government agencies understand this mandate and have been working to meet their customers' expectations. With federal actions like the Executive Order on Transforming Customer Experience,[3] the establishment of an Office of Customer Experience, and tools like Digital.gov's Customer Experience Toolkit, agencies at both the federal and state levels have mandates and guidance to support their journeys.

Agencies are particularly looking to digital tools and modernization strategies that will streamline communications and workloads. Document management systems, for example, are often burdensome to employees and customers alike, with the sheer volume of paperwork making it hard to rapidly access, process, or share information with either colleagues or clients. This can negatively impact the relationship between government agencies and their constituents.
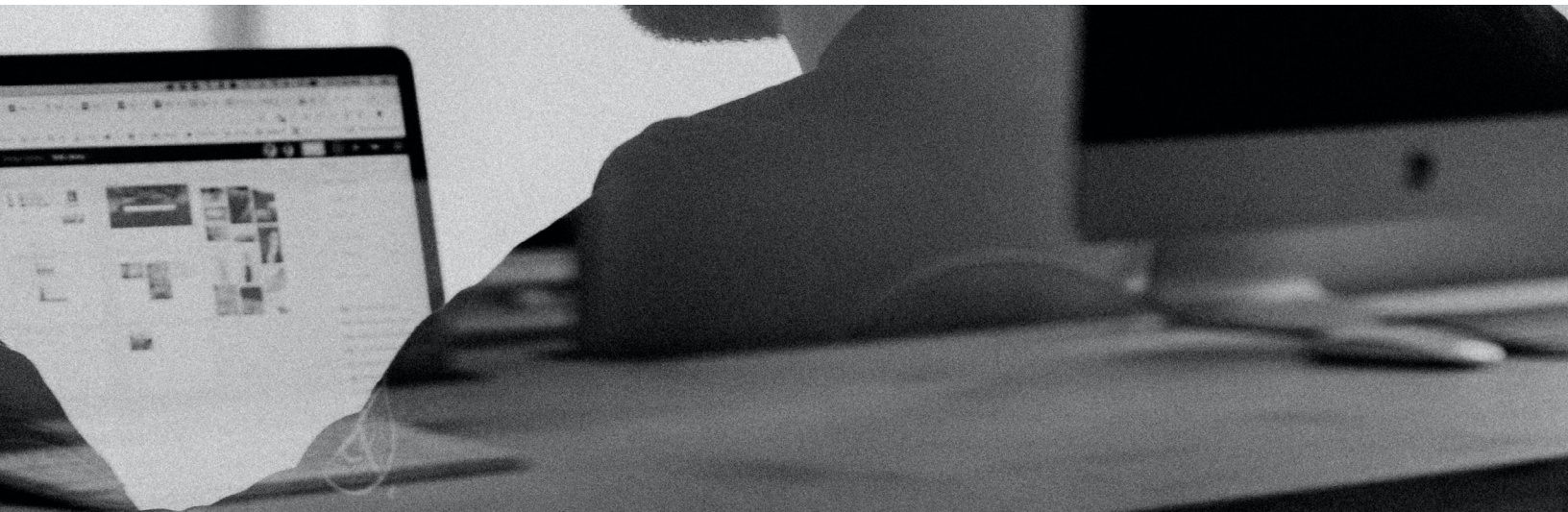
PLAYBOOK OVERVIEW

To effectively respond to the customer service needs of their constituents, we suggest that all levels of government agencies consider the following steps to elevate the customer experience.

PLAY 01

Understand the Baseline

Agencies need to understand where they are now when it comes to customer experience. While agencies may feel confident in their offerings, it is crucial to keep customer feedback loops open and responsive, and to ensure investment is responding to expressed needs.

PLAY 02

Identify the Gaps

Manual processes and outdated systems can slow agency response times – a source of frustration for customers and vendors alike. Agencies who take the time to identify their gaps or delays in service are more prepared to seek out possible solutions.

PLAY 03

Make the Link

Thinking critically about how gaps in the customer experience and accessibility can align with opportunities for technological advancement can help agencies prioritize the investments that will have the most impact.

PLAY 04

Strategize for Success

Achieving the customer service goals both the federal government and individual agencies have set are critical for the relationship between the government and its citizens. Making strategic decisions about solutions can make the difference between a frustrating versus satisfying customer experience.

WHO IS YOUR CUSTOMER? YOU MUST KNOW THAT TO PROVIDE EXCELLENT CX.

Focusing on customer service as a core function of government is critical to mission success. **Citizens rely on federal and state agencies for support, information, and assistance.** From the IRS answering questions about taxes to the the Department of Veterans Affairs providing healthcare assistance to states providing statewide safety net assistance, each agency has a customer base with a specific set of needs and expectations. It is no surprise that 95% percent of respondents say customer service is a priority for their agency. However, successful customer experience strategies must be designed to respond directly to these specific needs and expectations.

How much of a priority is customer service for your agency?

Percentage of respondents, n=200
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

High priority — 65%

Medium priority — 30%

Low priority — 6%

Not a priority — 0%
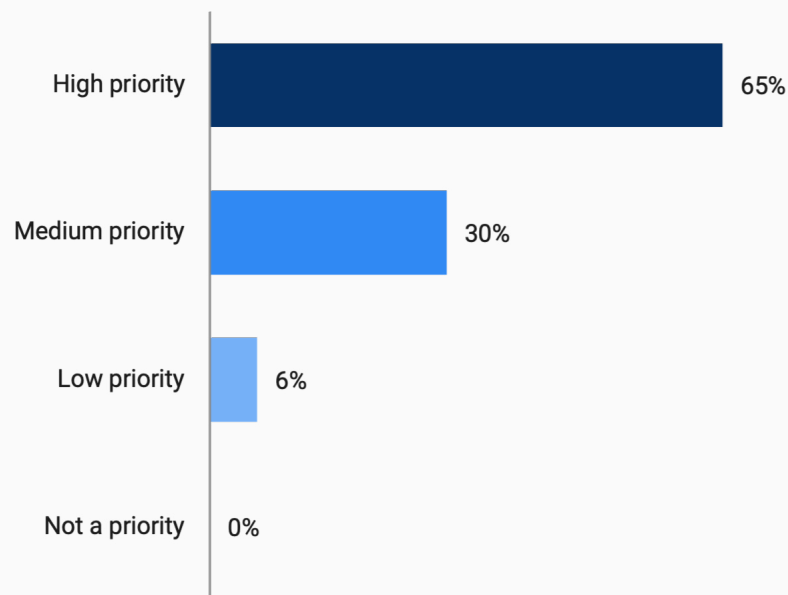
SOLICITING CUSTOMER FEEDBACK IS A CRUCIAL PART OF THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE LOOP.

Soliciting customer feedback is a crucial component of understanding how they interact with an agency and its services. Without information about what is and is not working – or without asking the right questions and engaging with the responses – agencies can't identify or address any gaps that might exist. Understanding how consistent the current customer experience is can also give agencies a clear view of how they can improve.

Is everyone following the CX strategies? Not according to 29% of respondents. Are customers consistently being asked to give feedback on their experience? While 69% of respondents think so, nearly one third (32%) disagree. Ensuring consistent customer service and feedback across the board can help agencies pinpoint the real gaps in their strategies.

My agency has a customer experience strategy that everyone follows.

Percentage of respondents, n=200
Note: Percent-ages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Strongly agree	27%
Somewhat agree	45%
Somewhat disagree	20%
Strongly disagree	9%
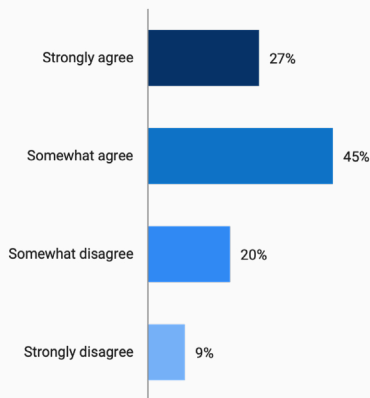
27%

of respondents strongly agree employees follow their existing customer experience strategies. Almost half only somewhat agree.

My agency consistently collects customer experience feedback from constituents.

Percentage of respondents, n=200
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Strongly agree	36%
Somewhat agree	33%
Somewhat disagree	20%
Strongly disagree	12%
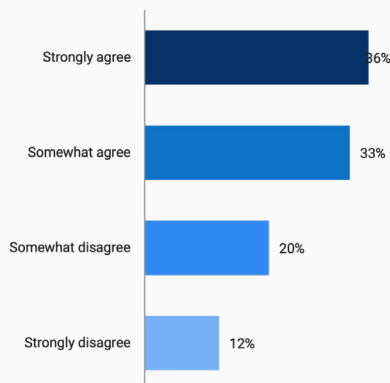
32%

of respondents do not think that their agency is consistently collecting feedback from users on their experience and only 33% somewhat agree.

Serving the Public

Positive customer experiences in the private sector are the difference between choosing one brand or another – but in the public sector, these experiences are most closely correlated with increased public trust in institutions. Just under one-third of respondents think their agency is providing this positive customer experience for their constituents. Half somewhat agree that the agency delivers that good experience, indicating room for improvement.

To improve these numbers, agencies must ask where the gaps are. Establishing a clear baseline of how constituents view agency CX is critical to investing in solutions that will best address their customers' needs.

Our constituents are generally happy with the customer experience they have working with my agency.

Percentage of respondents, n=200
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Response	Percentage
Strongly agree	31%
Somewhat agree	52%
Somewhat disagree	14%
Strongly disagree	4%
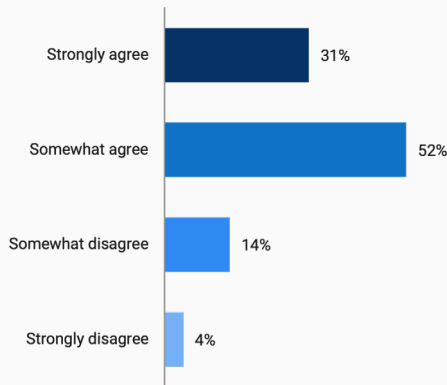
31%

of respondents believe that their constituents are generally pleased with their customer experience, leaving 69% feeling less confident.

My agency delivers an excellent experience for constituents.

Percentage of respondents, n=200
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Response	Percentage
Strongly agree	34%
Somewhat agree	49%
Somewhat disagree	12%
Strongly disagree	6%

34%

of respondents think that their agency delivers an excellent experience for their constituents.

AUTOMATING SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES IS KEY TO IMPROVING CUSTOMER SERVICE.

Once the baseline is established, the next step is to **identify the processes and systems that impact customer experiences**. Respondents identified several challenges to providing top-notch customer service. Many of these are rooted in the need to modernize the technology they use. Over a quarter of respondents identify both budget constraints and outdated IT systems as the primary challenges to improving customer experience, and another 20% indicate that manual processing slows down response times. Budget constraints are always a concern within agencies, and many IT departments at all levels of the government are still working toward full network and system modernization. While the budget and technology challenges can feel daunting, determining which systems and processes can be automated in the short term is an actionable first step that will have an impact.

What is the main challenge to improving the customer experience at your agency?

Percentage of respondents, n=200
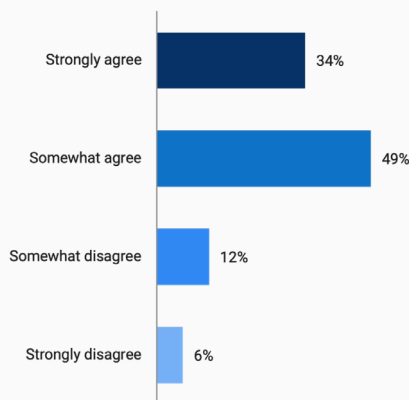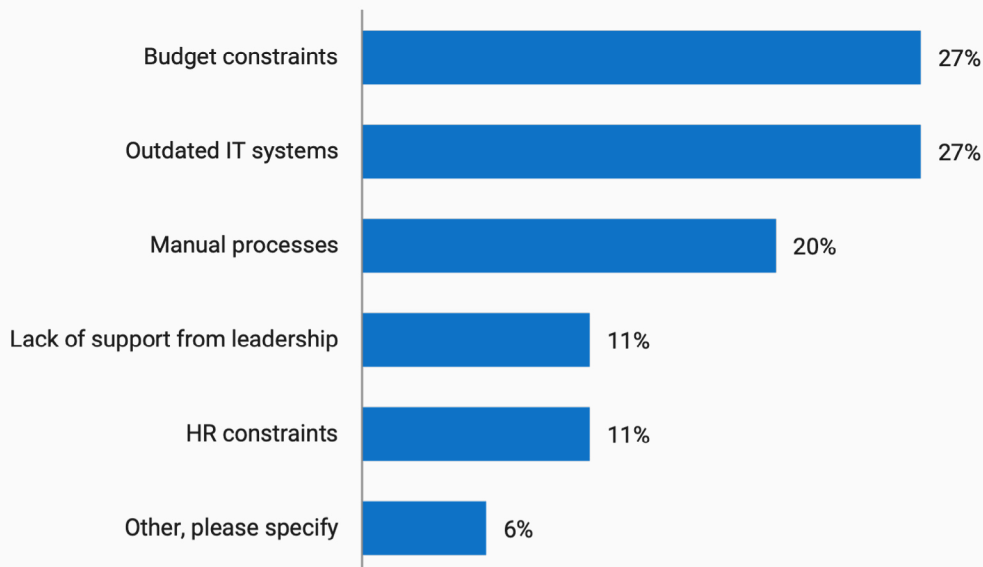Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

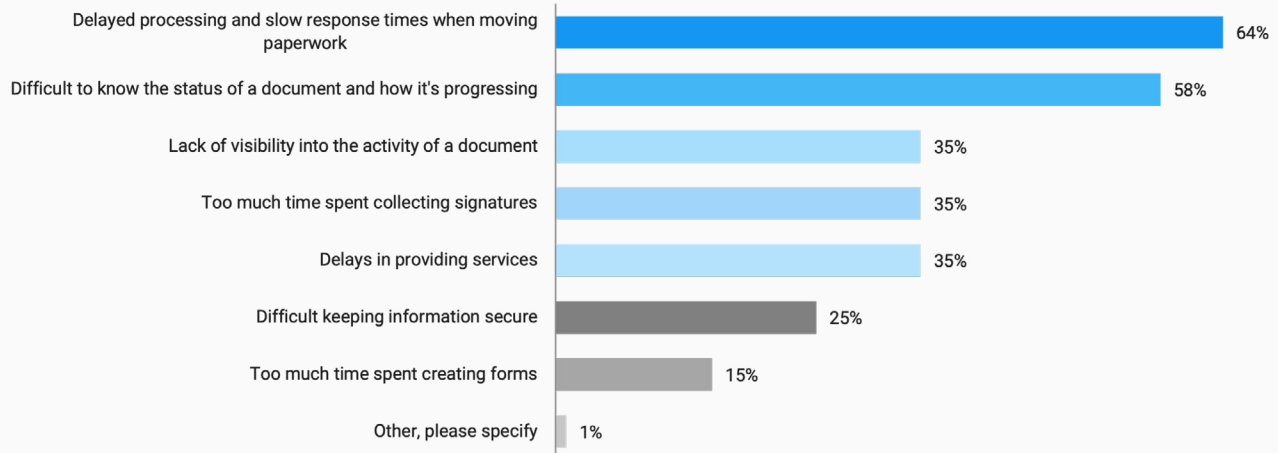| Challenge	Percentage
Budget constraints	27%
Outdated IT systems	27%
Manual processes	20%
Lack of support from leadership	11%
HR constraints	11%
Other, please specify	6%

PAPER-BASED PROCESSES COST THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT $38 BILLION EVERY YEAR.

One of the biggest gaps in customer service in both the public and private sectors is slow response times to customers. For the government, the time it takes to manually process documents is a primary cause of delays. **Nearly two-thirds of respondents blame paper-based processing for delays and slow response times**, and over half say it is difficult to not know the status of a document. These delays can be costly – paper-based processes cost the federal government $38.7 billion annually, including backlogs at the IRS that led to major delays in processing paper tax returns that cost the agency $3 billion in interest in 2021, according to the Chamber of Commerce.[4] Citizens and employees alike benefit from increased visibility into the status and activity of documents. Agencies at all levels can be impacted by the "paper burden," and both customer experience and public trust can be negatively affected by delays, backlogs, and uncertainty.

What have been the biggest impacts that paper-based, manual documents have had on your agency? Select all that apply.

Percentage of respondents, n=200
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Impact	Percentage
Delayed processing and slow response times when moving paperwork	64%
Difficult to know the status of a document and how it's progressing	58%
Lack of visibility into the activity of a document	35%
Too much time spent collecting signatures	35%
Delays in providing services	35%
Difficult keeping information secure	25%
Too much time spent creating forms	15%
Other, please specify	1%

Slow processes are frustrating for agencies looking to provide rapid and seamless customer service. Managing paper documents plays a significant role in this frustration. Public servants who are trying to fulfill healthcare requests, approve housing vouchers, or help a taxpayer may need access to several different pieces of documentation, both within and across agencies. Without streamlined approaches to sharing documentation, this process can be even more drawn out. Agencies should consider ways in which they can reduce the volume of documents and improve collaboration strategies, both to relieve the paper burden on their own employees and to serve their customers at mission speed.

What are the biggest challenges to managing paper-based, manual documents in your agency? Select all that apply.

Percentage of respondents, n=200
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding
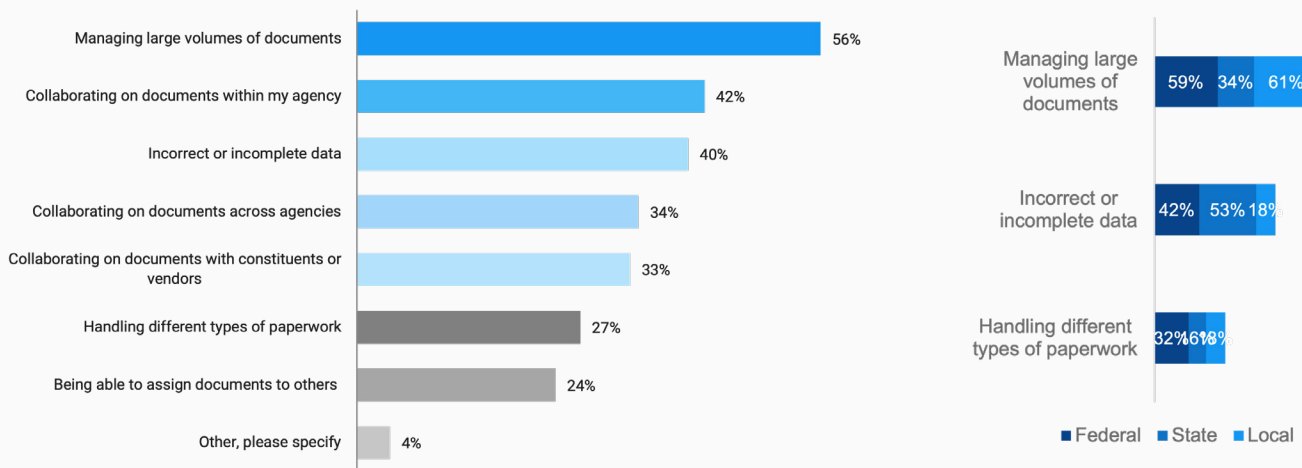
61%

of **local** respondents find managing large volumes of documents in a paper-based system challenging, compared to 34% of state respondents.
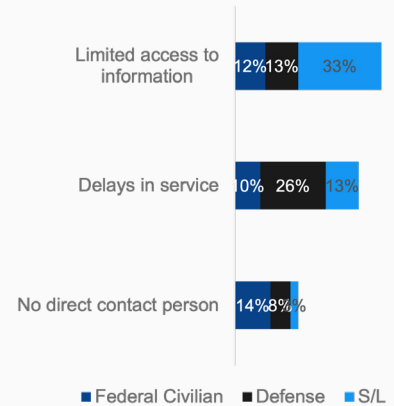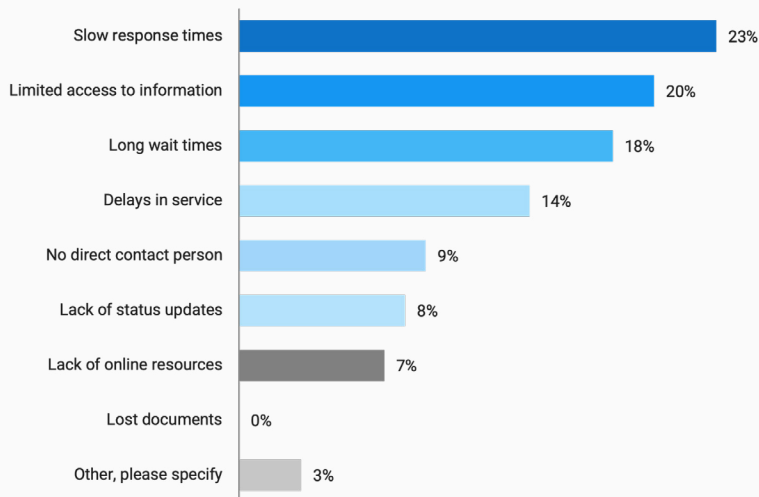
32%

of **federal** respondents find handling different types of paperwork challenging.

Serving the Public

Customers waiting for key services from government agencies expect the same kind of seamless interactions with their public servants as with the private sector – but this is sometimes not the case. Some of the primary complaints from constituents and vendors revolve around slow response times and long wait times for responses. When combined with other issues, such as a lack of online resources or knowing who to contact for help, the customer experience can be one of frustration and uncertainty.

These backlogs impact both employees and constituents. Agencies should particularly identify where they can reduce response times and provide up-to-date information for constituents.

What is the single biggest complaint you receive from constituents and vendors about the experience they have with your agency?

Percentage of respondents, n=200 Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Slow response times	23%
Limited access to information	20%
Long wait times	18%
Delays in service	14%
No direct contact person	9%
Lack of status updates	8%
Lack of online resources	7%
Lost documents	0%
Other, please specify	3%

	Federal Civilian	Defense	S/L
Limited access to information	12%	13%	33%
Delays in service	10%	26%	13%
No direct contact person	14%	8%	%

26%

of **defense** respondents report an issue with delays in service with their constituents, compared to 10% of federal civilian and 13% of state and local agencies.

33%

of **state and local** respondents note that users complain about limited access to information, in comparison to 12% of federal civilian agencies.

03 MAKE THE LINK

With a clear understanding of where they are and where issues remain, agencies must then **make the link between where the gaps are and what can be done about them**. Twenty-one percent of respondents, for example, say their agency is not leveraging technology to connect them with their customer base, and over a third do not offer digital-first services – which, for a distributed and highly digitally focused customer base, may not be enough. Agencies should look to see where they can invest to bridge the gaps between the problems and what is possible.

Thinking about technology and the customer experience, does your agency do any of the following?

Percentage of respondents, n=200
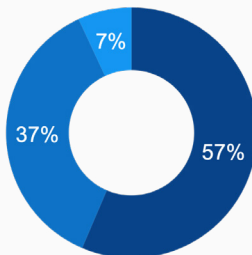Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Use technology/digital tools to transform the customer experience

3%
21%
77%
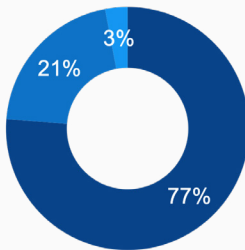
21%

of respondents say that their agency does not use technology or digital tools to improve their CX.
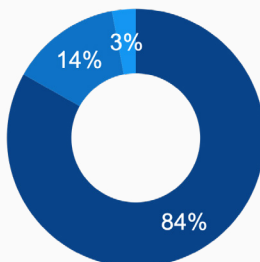
Offer digital-first/mobile accessible services

7%
37%
57%

37%

of respondents do not yet offer digital-first or mobile-accessible services to their customers.

Have online forms, applications & resources


3%
14%
84%

■ Yes
■ No
■ Don't Know

84%

of respondents offer online information — a service customers expect — leaving a 16% who do not (or don't know).

It makes sense that agencies who say they struggle with document management processes would look for technological solutions, and a majority have invested in some way. However, **18% say their agency has not implemented any technology to help with document management.** Furthermore, while these solutions seem to have benefited employees of agencies (84%), the confidence in the same benefit for citizens is much lower. While it is important that solutions to document management problems alleviate burdens on employees, it is equally important that agencies consider solutions that will directly interact with the customer to improve their experience.

Has your agency implemented any technology solutions to improve its document management processes?

Percentage of respondents, n=200
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

3%
18%
72%
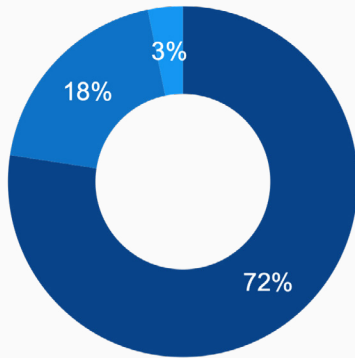
72%

of respondents have implemented some sort of technology-based document management process.

Do you believe your agency's document management technology solutions have contributed to a better experience for constituents/employees?

76%

of respondents think that their technology solutions have translated into a better customer experience.

Constituents

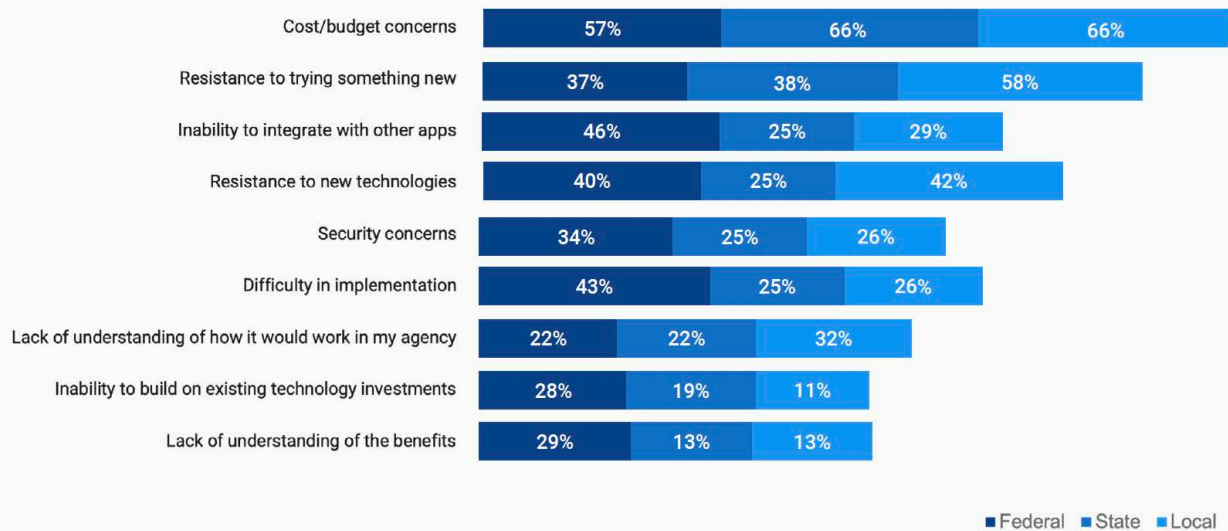8%
16%
76%

Employees

7%
9%
84%

■ Yes
■ No
■ Don't Know
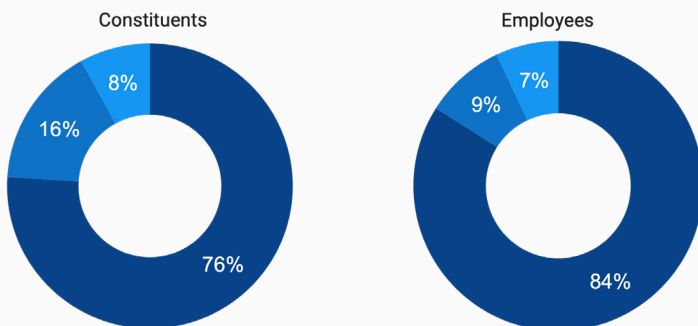
04 STRATEGIZE FOR SUCCESS

ROBUST INVESTMENTS INTO BOTH TECHNOLOGY AND AGENCY CULTURES ARE CRUCIAL.

Document management issues can be a burden on employees, delay work processes, frustrate constituents, and erode public trust in government agencies. Having a strategic plan in place to streamline this system can pay significant dividends. Robust investments in technology are important. However, so is investment into agency cultures. With 41% of respondents citing resistance to something new and 38% citing resistance to new technologies as a key barrier to implementation, developing strong training and support programs in tandem with technology integration is key to strategizing effective solutions. Public servants who feel confident and supported are more able to provide the excellent customer service agencies are striving for.

What do you see as the biggest barriers to implementing a document management technology solution in your agency?

Percentage of respondents, n=200
Note: Percentages may not add up to
100% due to rounding

Barrier	Federal	State	Local
Cost/budget concerns	57%	66%	66%
Resistance to trying something new	37%	38%	58%
Inability to integrate with other apps	46%	25%	29%
Resistance to new technologies	40%	25%	42%
Security concerns	34%	25%	26%
Difficulty in implementation	43%	25%	26%
Lack of understanding of how it would work in my agency	22%	22%	32%
Inability to build on existing technology investments	28%	19%	11%
Lack of understanding of the benefits	29%	13%	13%

■ Federal ■ State ■ Local

Automated, robust document management systems improve CX. While the challenges associated with implementing the technology may seem daunting, the benefits are significant. Respondents see increases in productivity, speed, and efficiency as some of the top effects of a holistic management system, noting also smoother digital processes, better visibility, and streamlined flows.

Planning for success means keeping these benefits, and the end goal – of a customer experience that leaves them satisfied – top of mind, even through challenges.

What do you see as the top potential benefits of implementing a document management technology solution for your agency?

Percentage of respondents, n=200
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding

Respondents selected their top 5.

Benefit	Percentage
Increases productivity	41%
Accelerates processes allowing for quicker turnaround time	39%
Constituents receive services that they need quickly and efficiently	38%
Digitizes workflow	37%
Improves the overall customer experience	35%
Smoother end-to-end document management	33%
Frees up time for employees to focus more on strategic or meaningful work	32%
Better visibility in document activity	32%
Reduces the need for manual paperwork	27%
Better protects data	26%
Supports a hybrid work environment	25%
Supports internal employee collaboration	23%
Reduces the risk of data processing mistakes	21%
Streamlines and integrates siloed and disconnected processes	17%
Artificial intelligence (AI) can look through data and track information	8%
Other, please specify	1%

BEST PRACTICES

As agencies continue to work to improve their customer service offerings, there are several best practices that can guide them[5], including:

- Honestly assess what agencies are doing well, and what needs to be improved
- Identify what matters most to their citizen base, including the ways they expect to interact with agencies
- Include employee needs and concerns in CX design
- Focus on accessible, agile, iterative, and customer-centric processes
- Use shared services & improve digital interactions
- Highlight collaboration, both internally and across agencies and stakeholders

INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE

Today's constituents expect access to the 24/7 self-serve, mobile-friendly, digital tools that are common in their everyday lives. In order to enhance customer experiences, government agencies will need to streamline a wide range of processes and paperwork to meet the growing needs and expectations of the public they serve and the agency staff they employ.

For many agencies, the biggest challenge is determining how to get started on enhancing external CX capabilities to meet constituent expectations. The core foundation for improving experiences is leveraging innovations that enhance and streamline all interdependent processes. This begins with expediting the migration from outdated technology infrastructure, implementing change management protocols, and increasing accountability of stakeholders who provide services to the government.

One critical area in government where customer experience has a significant impact is within health and human services agencies, whose mission is founded on enhancing the health and well-being of constituents.

To enhance customer experiences, government health agencies have already streamlined processes and paperwork to improve overall time to value for meeting the expanding needs and expectations of the public and their employees. For example, DocuSign played a role in the integrated systems that enabled the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) to expedite its distribution of $175 billion in grants for the Provider Relief Fund, which supports families, workers and healthcare providers in the battle against the pandemic. As a result, the agency was able to shorten its grant distribution process from three to four months to as little as five days.
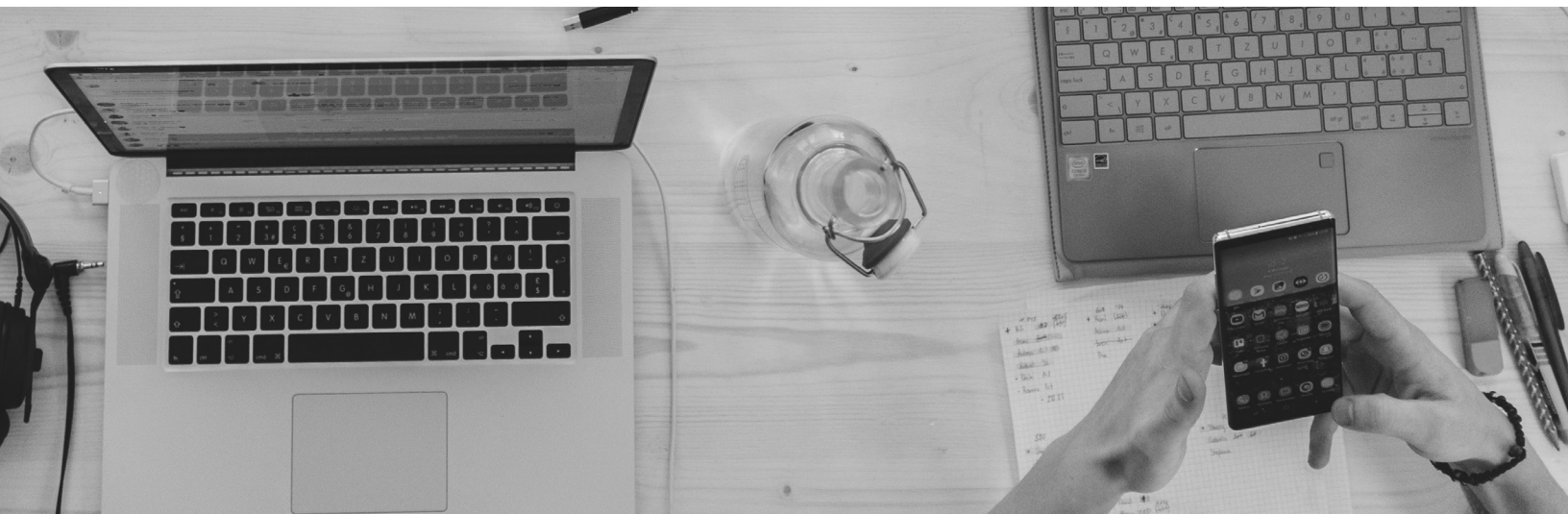
CONCLUSION

Modernization is a key part of any customer experience strategy. This is particularly relevant as it pertains to document management. The enormous paper burden that affects both federal and state and local governments can delay citizens in receiving needed information or assistance, affecting their experience and their trust in government agencies. Agencies, in turn, benefit from streamlined workflows that make it easier to collect, process, respond to, and collaborate with documents, both inside and outside their agency. For agencies looking to build a responsive and efficient customer experience strategy, it is critical that they not only understand where they are, but how to bridge the gaps to achieve their goals.
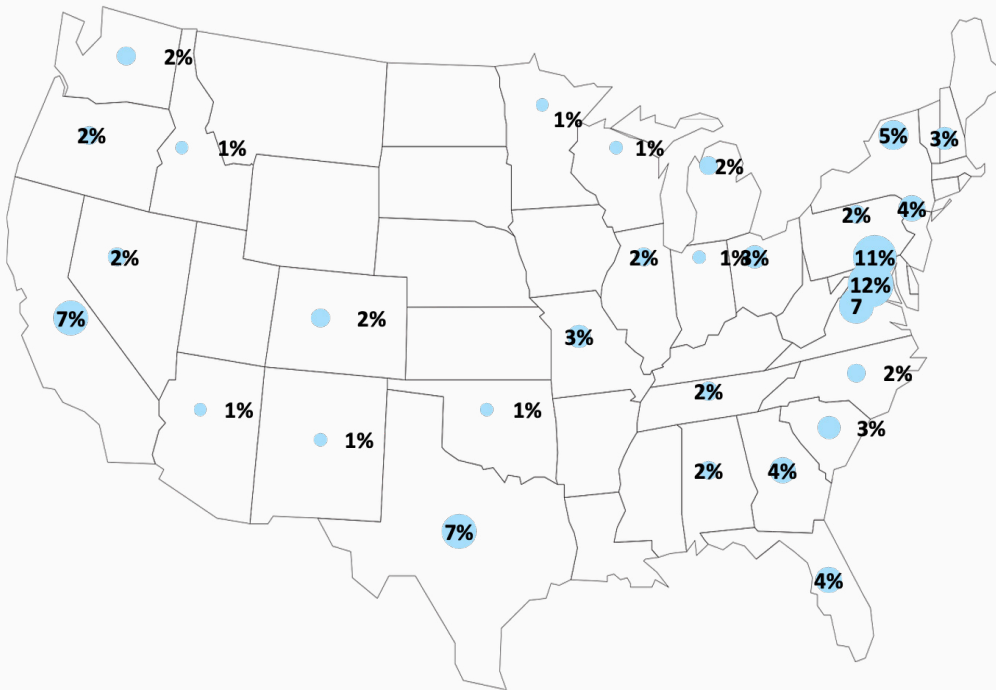
In the digital age, customers expect to be able to interact with their government agencies seamlessly and intuitively, with little to no delay. Investing in the right tools that connect citizens to the services they need is fundamental to both customer satisfaction and, in turn, public trust.
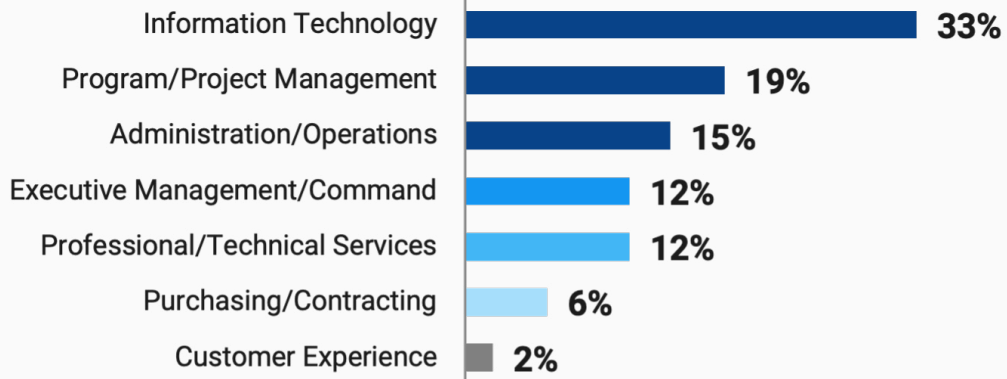
CITATIONS

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2.   https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/06/public-trust-in-government-1958-2022/

3.   https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/12/13/executive-order-on-transforming-federal-customer-experience-and-service-delivery-to-rebuild-trust-in-government/

4.   https://www.fedscoop.com/paper-based-processes-cost-government-billions/

5.   https://digital.gov/resources/customer-experience-toolkit/

RESPONDENT PROFILE

Map of US based Respondents

Which of the following best describes your role in your agency?

Role	Percentage
Information Technology	33%
Program/Project Management	19%
Administration/Operations	15%
Executive Management/Command	12%
Professional/Technical Services	12%
Purchasing/Contracting	6%
Customer Experience	2%

RESPONDENT PROFILE

Which of the following best describes your employment status?

9%
County Government

11%
City Government

16%
State Government

46%
Federal Intelligence

19%
Defense
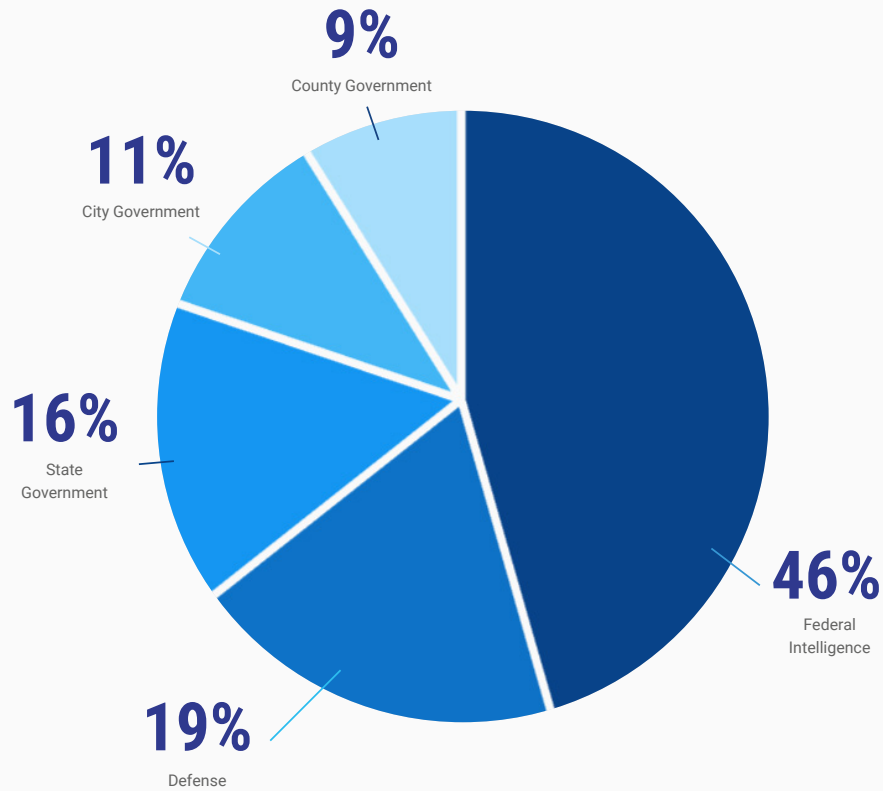
In which of the following ways are you involved in your agency's document workflows that support or serve constituents/customers? Select all that apply.

Category	Percentage
Management of programs or projects	72%
Routine interaction to accomplish work	71%
Executive-level oversight of programs or projects	39%
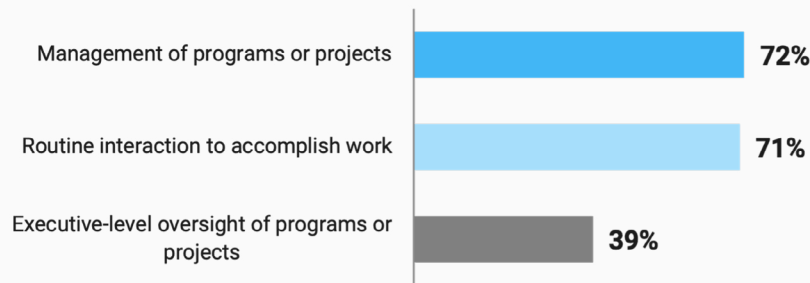
ABOUT

About Government Business Council

As Government Executive Media Group's research division, Government Business Council (GBC) is dedicated to advancing the business of government through analysis, insight, and analytical independence. An extension of Government Executive's 50 years of exemplary editorial standards and commitment to the highest ethical values, GBC studies influential decision makers from across government to produce intelligence-based research and analysis.

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