



Modernizing the Mission

The 3 Biggest Data Challenges Facing State
and Local Government Today

With more information at their fingertips, state and local government leaders are itching to use data to make their jobs easier and help the citizens they serve. At a recent roundtable, agency and IT leaders from across the United States came together to share best practices on how to prioritize data transformation.

Every community in the U.S. faces its own set of challenges. For example, a small town in middle America might be more focused on improving rural broadband access than a large town or city. Meanwhile, a city or state that has witnessed an uptick in COVID-19 cases might put increased emphasis on allocating resources toward testing or vaccination sites.

Despite their diverse challenges, most city and state governments share a common pain point: data. With more information at their fingertips than ever before, state and local government leaders are itching to use this data more effectively — not only to make their jobs easier but also to optimize the ways they serve citizens.

Of course, that's easier said than done.

"With all the time and the money and the effort spent on these next-generation digital systems, there still seems to be a significant challenge associated with unifying data from these efforts," said Matt Walk, State and Local government lead at Snowflake. "And so this data silo problem persists."

At a recent roundtable, hosted by Route Fifty and sponsored by Snowflake, Walk joined agency IT leaders from across the United States to discuss best practices on how to prioritize data transformation. Below are a few key takeaways from the discussion.



1. Data Is an Operational Problem, Not a Technological One

A common misconception among government employees is that many data challenges can be easily improved by investing in better technology. And in many cases, faster and more integrated technology can drive efficiencies and free up resources. But roundtable participants agreed that the problem is not the technology itself, it's more often the processes in place that make it difficult for agency staff to use this technology effectively.

"We really want to see data as an operational asset first," said

Rachel Stone, chief data officer for the Utah Governor's Office of Management and Budget.

Stone recognizes that data is also a technological asset, but by looking at it through a more operational lens, she and her team can ask more strategic questions.

"What's your goal? What are your targets? Where are you aiming for? How does that align with the governor's roadmap? How does the data follow?" The positioning here is strategic so that we can align the governor's priorities and how operations should change," she said.

Paul Jurasin is also familiar with these challenges. As the director of the California Polytechnic State University Digital Transformation Hub, his research focuses on how governments, non-profit organizations and educational institutions are using data.

"A lot of times people, especially in IT, people ... create a solution that they think is the right solution for a problem without asking the customer what the problem is," Jurasin said at the roundtable.

"We always ask the question: What problem are we solving? And I know for myself and my team, if we ever leave an interaction with any of our customers ... and we can't answer that question, then by nature we are failing."

Zach Oxman, SLED West District Manager, Snowflake

It can, of course, be tempting to want to invest in whatever new technology is on the market, whether that's AI, Blockchain or any other platforms that have evolved over the last several years. But Zach Oxman, SLED West district manager at Snowflake, a secure data cloud company, warned that this type of thinking can lead agencies down a slippery slope.

"We always ask the question: What problem are we solving? And I know for myself and my team, if we ever leave an interaction with any of our customers ... and we can't answer that question, then by nature we are failing," he said. "And I've seen so much in my career that technologies are adopted because they happen to be cool or interesting ... [but] at the end of the day, it's outcomes-driven. Let's identify an outcome: homelessness in California, COVID response, emergency response for security and threat posture."

Oxman added that he is increasingly seeing his peers connect the dots between how this technology can actually solve their problems.

Mike Mayta, chief information officer of Wichita, Kansas, is one local leader spearheading this approach at his own organization. "Regardless of whether you're in IT, on the data side, or on the management side, it comes down to: What are you trying to fix?" he said. "It's ... that whole fail fast [mindset]. Because the more

you can do [that], at least in our stage, the more you start having city managers [and] department heads starting to see the value of data.”

2. State and Local Employees Call On Federal Officials to Improve Data Governance

While some of the challenges state and local agencies face can be easily fixed, others are not so simple. That’s especially true when it comes to data sharing.

Kevin Jones, chief information officer at the Indiana Department of Child Services, explained that his agency sits under the umbrella of the Department of Health and Human Services. However, the security requirements currently in place — and the nature of his work in the realm of child services — make data sharing especially difficult.

“There are sister agencies that I work with that I’d love to share data with, but there are legal requirements for your job ... because the level of PII that you expose individuals to becomes a great risk, he said. “I have to worry about that level of security. I have to worry about a disgruntled employee who may have access to something they shouldn’t have access [to].”

Jones takes security especially seriously, since the lives and livelihoods of children and their families are directly impacted by his work.

“I think that the nightmare that I have being criminally and civilly responsible for the data that sits in my space sometimes pushes me not to want the data,” he said. “Am I going to help children? Or am I going to create a bigger headache for children? Am I going to expose them to risk?”

Solving this challenge, however, requires a top-down approach.

“There’s a bigger conversation that has to be had at the federal level to help us at the state and local level be in compliance and/or ensure that we’re ... providing better outcomes for our people,” he explained.

3. Successful Digital Transformation Comes Down to People

In any discussion around digital transformation, “people,” “process” and “technology” are three words that often make their way into the conversation — and for good reason.

“If there’s no alignment between people, process [and] technology, it’s a disaster,” said Jones. “So [we’re] really trying to fix that for this agency and build a model that other state agencies can use as well.”

For state and local government leaders, the “people” component is critical. Agencies must consider the role and responsibilities of their personnel in these digital transformation initiatives. “One of the things that we also find [is] that the biggest obstacle to that transition [from a traditional data center to a cloud environment] is the people who are going to be involved in it,” said Jurasin. “If you don’t take the people into account right from the

start, they’re going to be the people who are going to push back enough so that your transformation is just not going to work very well.”

That “people” component extends beyond just agency personnel — it also helps state and local agencies understand the needs of their communities. However, the siloed communication channels that exist between and even within agencies have a direct impact on constituents. For example, many of the logistical challenges that citizens experienced while signing up for a vaccine appointment could have been avoided if agencies had communicated more effectively, said Jack Belcher, chief information officer of Arlington County, Virginia.

“You had public health working with emergency management and not even talking to data analysts, not talking to technologists,” he said.

Those siloes created widespread confusion about whether or not individuals had successfully scheduled their vaccine appointment.

“That affects people’s lives,” Belcher said.



In order to effectively drive transformation, government IT staff need to gain buy-in from the rest of their agency. To do so, New York State’s Acting Executive Deputy Chief Information Officer Don Horan recommends some quick wins. And, he explained at the roundtable, the best wins are “those that impact the people and the people’s lives.”

“We just assume that we can do this digital transformation and everyone’s happy. However, the pandemic has taught us that there are people that don’t have cell phones. There are people that do not have internet connectivity. So we need to really acknowledge these assumptions with these commissioners, talk to them about their concerns, talk to them about their problems,” Horan explained.

That also means moving past the IT jargon.

“Stop talking about efficiency, stop talking about saving money, stop all those sales pitches and just bring it down to how are you impacting lives,” said Horan.