Product Management Approach Being Adopted Across Federal Agencies

Representatives from academia and the public sector discuss early-stage navigation of product management for federal IT.

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Thought leaders within and adjacent to federal agencies are endeavoring to bring a product management approach to government IT, according to key representatives from the U.S. Digital Service and Georgetown University.

Product management is relatively new to the field, said Clare Bayley, director of product and strategic operations at the Digital Service. Product management as an organizational approach has only been widely implemented and discussed in the private sector for the past four years, and its tentative implementation within the
federal space is an even more recent enterprise, Bayley said. This renders product management both an exciting and dynamic process, yet one still undergoing considerable development in its core fundamentals.

Bayley is deeply familiar with the complex interplay between technical development and organizational management — particularly how strategic reorganization can mutually enrich both. Bayley joined the agency intent on dedicating her technical expertise to public service and previously worked as a lead at Google CodeLabs.

The essence of any product management approach is the treatment of a product as an end unto itself — requiring consistent focus on an application’s value for its user base, Bayley said. This leads to a considerable degree of inherent ambiguity, since fine-tuning a product throughout the design process can lead to unexpected turns in its overall development.

This flexibility and comfort with ambiguity is therefore both product management’s greatest value as well as one of its inherent challenges.

“One of the strengths of product management in the private sector is that degree of ambiguity,” said Bayley. This is much easier to navigate in the more fast-moving, change-tolerant world of Silicon Valley. However, Bayley's greatest efforts as USDS' director of product have centered on adapting this approach to America’s necessarily methodical, regimented federal agencies, she noted.

As an initial concern, the motives behind product design are markedly different in the federal government. The core drivers behind adopting a product management approach across Silicon Valley centered on attention to the competitive market and the associated profit motive, Bayley said. In contrast, making the best user experience as a public good unto itself is perhaps the core goal of any public sector endeavor.

As a result, USDS has become a translation point for bridging this private-public sector gap in product management. Bayley outlined that this has required a certain degree of process translation as well.

“You can take a private-industry product manager into government, and if their boss has different expectations of how they’re supposed to operate, it won’t work out,” she said.
Ensuring a product management approach works within any organization — whether private or federal — requires a certain degree of internal reorganization to make the best use of this kind of product-responsive style, Bayley continued. This usually requires two fundamentals — internal reorganization and executive buy-in. When Bayley began her tenure as USDS director of product, she made sure that “my product became my team.”

Recognizing the amount of collaboration it would require to best leverage product management, Bayley met with USDS agency leads to foster sharing of institutional knowledge and best practices. Bayley summarized this approach as, “I have a meta-job … my product is the community.”

Bayley also described the separation between a product management approach and the older project management paradigm, noting these two methods can potentially coexist and bolster one another. This requires coordinating the efforts of project managers, who are focused on executing a predetermined project, with the more fluid efforts of product managers who are singularly focused on designing the best application or utility.

Allowing product managers to act as coordinators with major stakeholders is one of their core strengths.

“Product managers excel when they can translate technical subjects to a nontechnical audience,” Bayley said.

There has already been demonstrable success in fostering a product management style within some of America’s largest federal agencies. One notable example is the collaboration between USDS and the Department of Veterans Affairs in redesigning VA.gov as a more user-friendly portal.

“We decided to treat the website as a platform, and use it as a support for other platforms,” Bayley said.
Transforming the VA’s veteran service website into a hub for new applications has given the agency’s in-house talent space to integrate innovative products such as the Digital Claims Tool. In light of these newfound insights into technical innovation and management culture, Bayley explained, VA leads are looking to spread the product management approach among technical experts across the agency.

Formalizing a product management approach has also gained traction in academic institutions that work closely with the federal government, such as Georgetown University’s School of Continuing Studies. In spearheading the creation of Georgetown’s product management program, Chief Digital Officer Jeremy Stanton has made a mission of crystalizing how product management is taught and understood.

Much like USDS’ collaboration with federal agencies, Stanton has worked closely with USDS Product Manager Kelly O’Connor to bring Georgetown’s product management degree to fruition. Georgetown is one of America’s first institutions to offer a product management degree, and has benefited from ongoing private-public sector collaboration. The school’s product management program is the distinct brainchild of Stanton and O’Connor, with both having worked extensively in private industry prior to their endeavors at Georgetown.

Having been involved with software design since the early 2000s, Stanton asserts his employers would have likely produced better applications had they adopted a product management approach.

“Tech entrepreneurs and early product designers relied almost wholesale on an ad hoc approach,” Stanton said, recalling the formative years of Silicon Valley’s now-booming tech industry. One of product management’s greatest strengths is its easy coordination with human-centered design practices. The more adaptive, flexible nature of the product management approach allows developers to respond to human feedback and user testing. At its best, this process “gets the software out of the way and aligns functionality more closely with human need,” he said.
Stanton made similar assertions as Bayley in noting the organizational restructuring that is often necessary to best incorporate a product management approach. While a fixed project-management style mandates hard deadlines for certain objectives, product management often requires an iterative cycle of research, design and testing to ensure the product’s design responds to dynamic feedback.

A tolerance for this style of uncertainty necessitates adaptability among design teams as well as among stakeholders and C-suite executives who might be uncomfortable with that degree of ambiguity, Stanton explained. This understanding has informed Stanton and O’Connor’s ongoing expansion of Georgetown’s product management program, with the school now offering classes on transformational leadership for mid-career executives looking to adapt their organization’s style around the promises of product management.

One of the core tenets of strategic planning is that you can’t accomplish anything worthwhile without an effective organizational culture, Stanton said, noting that tomorrow’s executive leaders will have to answer an essential question, “How do we evolve what we’re doing to deal with the program that’s coming?”

In examining ongoing industry trends and the horizon of cloud computing and AI integration, Stanton mentioned that a product management approach may become obligatory for any organization looking to best take advantage of emerging technologies — including agencies within the federal government. Considering the exponential rate of technological change, products developed across months or years cannot be built along an unresponsive design process and be anywhere up to industry standard, Stanton said. In addition, the growing interconnection of tech, economic, political and environmental spheres will demand a more reactive product management design paradigm that is deft and adaptable to abrupt change, he added.

Stanton underscored that proactive anticipation of change is not merely beneficial to an organization at this point, but downright mandatory. He concluded by summarizing this approach as, “Design for change — anticipating novelty and rapid, unforeseen advancement.”

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