'As-a-Service' Models Key to Improving Agencies' Customer Experience

The end-user experience first relies on technologies like cloud to ensure the infrastructure is in place.

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Thu, 10/08/2020 - 10:18

Federal IT leaders are modernizing their IT infrastructure with multi-cloud environments, “as-a-service” approaches and other ways of iteratively updating systems to deliver more seamless and improved delivery for the customer experience.
For the Department of Veterans Affairs, IT service delivery is core to both external and internal customers, VA Infrastructure and Operations Executive Director Reginald Cummings said during Wednesday’s Infrastructure: Foundations for the Future virtual event. While Cummings delivers with internal customers (or more direct VA personnel within his organization), he stressed the core infrastructure needs to be stable and agile for veterans and external agencies.

At Customers and Border Protection, multi- and hybrid-cloud environments as well as approaches in "as-a-service" models, infrastructure as code, and continuous integration and delivery (CICD) are keys to delivering and modernizing its IT infrastructure for its customers.

“Infrastructure as code is part of our taxonomy — driving toward that effort to ensure that we’re doing all the things we can do from an orchestration standpoint and an automation standpoint to self-service and enable our delivered and other service providers to help themselves and truly have a CICD kind of experience for our development core,” said Edward Mays, enterprise data management and engineering executive director at CBP's Office of Information Technology. That self-service piece is critical to both internal and external customers to his office and CBP at large.

“We’ve embarked on self service,” Mays said. “We’re definitely big believers in infrastructure as code, and we’re pushing forward in that area. ... It’s how you do the business and the consistency and the standardization, so we’re definitely focusing on that. We’re looking at data lakes and data hubs in terms of reducing our data sprawl that we have, which actually turns into a better customer experience and reduced time for access.”

Defense Health Agency Solutions Delivery Division Director Col. Francisco Dominicci's ultimate goal is to “make IT boring again,” so that the Military Health System and its customers can deliver optimum medical care and research across the enterprise without worrying about the functionality of key IT, such as DHA’s electronic health record.
Amid DHA's EHR modernization effort, Dominicci said he has had to coordinate the consolidation of various capabilities and distributed EHR systems across over 100 locations around the world. Not only is this coordination challenging in maintaining contracts, but also in keeping smooth IT delivery to DHA’s user community.

“This requires a continued review of the plan, so even though you have a great strategic plan, that plan gets revised almost on a daily basis because of new discoveries, new processes, new issues that are uncovered,” Dominicci said.

Challenges in IT modernization efforts at DHA are common across agencies who also have to be flexible in their infrastructure planning and maintenance. This has especially been the case with COVID-19, which brought new strains to legacy infrastructure with limited capacity as more people moved online and depended quickly on IT.

Cummings and Mays, however, said that despite obstacles with legacy IT, cloud environments have been key in helping organizations like theirs be agile and scalable for new, sudden challenges and customer needs.

“The cloud allowed us to pivot quickly, while we did what we can do with our on-premise infrastructure,” Cummings said. “We quickly marshaled out and built out our cloud infrastructure. That allowed us to essentially accelerate our ability to accommodate both that internal and external customer base.”

IT officials have long argued that continuous and mindful technological modernization is critical to maintaining or improving delivery of government services. Cummings, Mays and Dominicci, however, discussed how those modernization efforts and investments are going toward better delivery of business to both government personnel and the public.

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