

Moving from Tech-Enabled to Digital-First in the Federal Space

By Alex Rodriguez



As the private sector continues to up the ante on what's possible for digital applications that make life better, the public space has historically struggled to keep up with the pace of that innovation. Strict governance, policies, and traditional hierarchies can make it more difficult to enact significant change in these spaces.

But as digital experience becomes considered more prerequisite to an outstanding employee or citizen experience, federal agencies can no longer uphold business as usual if they want to maintain trust with their constituencies and meet increasingly stringent metrics for efficiency and resource allocation.



The time of simply using technology to enable improved operations has passed. With initiatives like the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) [Cloud Smart program](#) in place, the stakes are higher than ever for public sector organizations to truly adopt digital-first mindsets that emphasize a foundational evolution of the way they do business. While this imperative can feel daunting, the most important thing for public sector leaders to understand is that getting started is key. There are blueprints from commercial first movers we can use and adopt to make the transformation easier and more seamless. And the process doesn't have to occur overnight. Set your strategy to be aggressive, yet realistic, and in time, your agency will achieve a digital-first culture.

So what is a digital-first organization? Being a digital-first enterprise is much more than implementing new technologies. It's connecting technology and culture to adapt to constant disruption, innovate business operations, and deliver exceptional consumer, citizen, and employee experiences. Creating trust that fuels citizen engagement and employee retention requires industry experts that can connect people, process, data, and technology to generate sustained growth.

The chart below outlines some differences between tech-enabled organizations and digital-first organizations and how those classifications may manifest in federal agencies.

	TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED ORGANIZATIONS	DIGITAL-FIRST ORGANIZATIONS
DATA AND TECHNOLOGY	<p>Improve how they operate using data and technology.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• No governance• Siloed focus with little to no recognition of enterprise need	<p>Change how they operate centered around technology and data.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focus on foundational operational improvements
CLOUD MINDSET	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Customizing technologies to meet legacy processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Looking beyond technology to focus on processes first
TRAINING AND INNOVATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Automating or simplifying existing processes without evaluating their efficacy• Making marginal improvements to citizen experience via technology without a clear strategy or actionable data	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Proactive use of data to initiate and execute process improvements• Highly-predictable processes• Challenging existing workflows and being unafraid to re-engineer them, when needed
SECURITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A terminal uniqueness mindset that believes commercial practices don't apply in the federal space	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Looking at end-to-end processes and rethinking how things are done in the context of available resources and technology• Using data to improve citizen experience, based on data and as part of the larger enterprise strategy• Learning from the private sector and embracing commercial best practices

DATA AND TECHNOLOGY

CLOUD MINDSET

TRAINING AND INNOVATION

SECURITY

TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED ORGANIZATIONS

Adopt a cloud-first mindset.

- Upgrading legacy systems or technologies
- Migrating to a cloud environment
- Leveraging technology to solve short-term problems
- Procurement strategies that adhere to policies but don't think beyond them
- Driving efficiency, eliminating repetitive tasks, and reducing manual labor
- Investing in EHR, ERP, CRM, analytics, and informatics while operating models stay the same

DIGITAL-FIRST ORGANIZATIONS

Embrace and enhance a cloud-smart mindset.

- Transforming how tech, processes, and people can improve overall outcomes
- Taking an enterprise view of data rather than working in siloes
- Implementing and improving scalable processes in conjunction with technology implementations
- Measuring transformation success via a set of key performance indicators
- Creating and maintaining a Center of Excellence to provide ongoing Cloud governance
- Creating flexible procurement models that are quicker and more efficient to streamline adoption of technology and drive innovation with contractors

DATA AND TECHNOLOGY

CLOUD MINDSET

TRAINING AND INNOVATION

SECURITY

TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED ORGANIZATIONS

Train people and drive the adoption of new technology.

- Helping shift the mindset of the workforce
- Fighting organizational resistance to change
- Employees that are threatened by technology
- One-off projects and initiatives
- Adding ad-hoc efficiencies to how people do their jobs
- Improving overall employee experience

DIGITAL-FIRST ORGANIZATIONS

Role model digital-first thinking and reward innovation.

- Culture of digital transformation embedded into the organization
- Empowering employees to feel ownership over processes and technology
- Forward-looking training approach
- Formalize innovation initiative – drive innovation
- Standards and best practices sharing
- Executive sponsorship
- Embrace technology
- Intentional change management
- Integration of technology into all core initiatives
- Skills assessment and development
- Manage the transformation actively – it's not a single event; it's a transformation
- Free up time for employees to focus on mission-critical, strategic activities

MOVING FROM TECH-ENABLED TO DIGITAL-FIRST IN THE FEDERAL SPACE

DATA AND TECHNOLOGY

CLOUD MINDSET

TRAINING AND INNOVATION

SECURITY

TECHNOLOGY-ENABLED ORGANIZATIONS

Invest in security measures to achieve compliance.

- Achieving an authority to operate

Security as a technical feature
Meeting minimal compliance requirements
Siloed security approach and design

DIGITAL-FIRST ORGANIZATIONS

Invest strategically and proactively in security measures to meet mission objectives.

- More focus on achieving mission objectives vs. checking a compliance box
- More proactive approach to ensuring appropriate security measures are in place
- Secure proactively by design
- Tailored cybersecurity plans and processes in the context of maintaining business operations
- Cybersecurity is viewed as a core business requirement
- Forward-looking security measures scale with business requirements



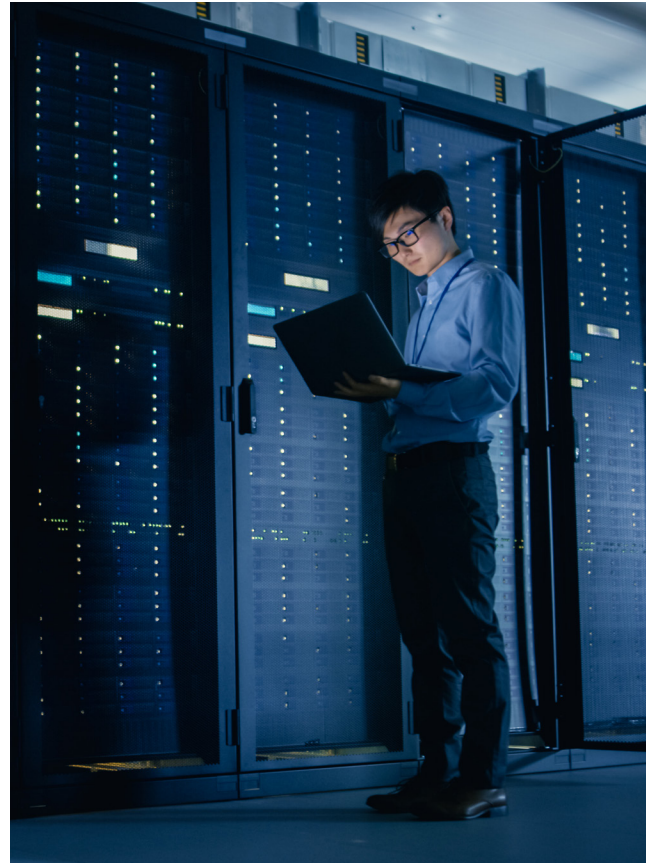
Now that you have a better understanding of the differences between technology-enabled and digital-first federal agencies, take a moment to think about your own organization. When we work with public sector teams, we always start by conducting a readiness assessment that provides a gap analysis and allows us to identify low-hanging fruit. As we mentioned previously, transitioning to a digital-first organization is a large undertaking and it can feel difficult to get started. It's okay to start small. As a matter of fact, starting with a pilot can really inform a longer-term digital-first strategy. But the first step is to start asking the right questions.

MOVING FROM TECH-ENABLED TO DIGITAL-FIRST IN THE FEDERAL SPACE

HERE'S A SHORT LIST TO GET YOU STARTED:

- What are the parts of your organization that are burdened by highly manual processes?
- What does your enterprise IT strategy look like?
- Where do you feel technology is most heavily customized to meet legacy processes?
- How does emerging technology fit into your IT roadmap?
- What are the biggest technological pain points in your citizen and employee experiences?
- What are the risks of inaction?

Once you've answered these questions honestly and with an open mind, consider your next best steps are to start transitioning your agency to a digital-first culture. While this change requires an upfront investment of time and resources, the payoff in the end is so worth it.



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