

MAKING THE GRADE IN DIGITAL GOVERNMENT

AGENCIES HAVE YET TO FULLY TAKE HEED OF DIGITAL STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS, INCLUDING OPEN SOURCE, OPEN DATA, AND AGILE ACQUISITION METHODS

Designed to promote interoperability, openness, and effectiveness of digital services across the federal government, the White House’s 2012 Digital Government Strategy set forth a number of goals and principles federal organizations have since sought to accomplish.¹ However, more than two years after the launch of the strategy, federal agencies have varied greatly in their ability to fulfill digital objectives set forth by the administration.

A recent Government Business Council study of over 300 government employees reveals that federal leaders currently give their agencies a C+ in digital strategy efforts.² Furthermore, the survey indicates that many agencies have yet to fully implement many of the key recommendations offered by the Digital Government Strategy and the administration’s recent guiding documents, the Digital Services Playbook and the TechFAR Handbook.

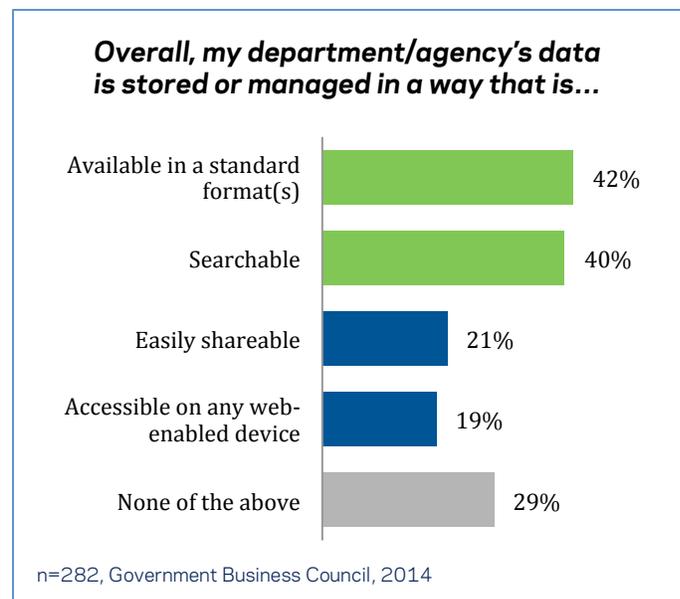
Openness and Interoperability

Federal guidance for agencies sets ambitious goals for the openness and usability of government-owned data, as well as the platforms that host such data.

Soon after taking office in his first term, President Obama issued the Open Government Directive, mandating agencies to achieve greater transparency, participation, and collaboration by raising the quality and accessibility of data.

The 2012 Digital Government Strategy’s ‘Information-Centric’ principles further build upon these goals by articulating the creation of common standards for both government IT systems and the information they hold and manage.³ Common standards can allow agencies to more easily collaborate internally and externally—with citizens, businesses, and other government organizations—through the use of unified languages and formats.

Unfortunately, many agencies still have much work to do to achieve these open data goals; only 42 percent of federal leaders from GBC’s survey report that their agencies store or manage data using standard formats.⁴



The Federal CIO’s August 2014 Digital Services Playbook acknowledges this disparity and urges agencies to “default to open.” Agencies are encouraged to build digital services more openly, for instance by creating web APIs that promote greater interaction with third parties such as citizens and businesses. The Playbook also

reiterates recommendations from the Digital Government Strategy that advocate for greater use of open source platforms, which can help avoid vendor lock-in on systems contracts and ensure that the quality of government technology matches that of the private sector. In accomplishing these aims, the Federal CIO asks agencies to consider open source solutions at all layers of IT infrastructure.⁵

These renewed calls echo previous and concurrent efforts by federal IT leadership to promote open source IT, not only as a viable option for strategic sourcing, but also as a way to achieve cost effectiveness. In October 2009, the Department of Defense CIO released a memorandum to dispel “misconceptions and misinterpretations” on open source software, citing that publicly-available and editable source code would allow defense systems to be more secure and continuously updated. Moreover, doing so would allow the department to operate more robustly in response to “changing situations, missions, and future threats.”⁶

More recently, the General Service Administration’s newly established 18F, an in-house, start-up inspired digital delivery group, has given itself the moniker “An Open Source Team.” 18F builds products for other agencies using only open source software and coding in order to promote flexibility, community involvement, cost savings, and reusability.⁷

Despite these clear calls to action and case studies, only 46 percent of federal leaders indicate that their agencies strive to use open source solutions rather than proprietary, closed source solutions.⁸ Even though agencies and those they serve stand to benefit greatly by implementing open data and open source recommendations, IT leaders must overcome skepticism and roadblocks that are delaying further progress in these areas.



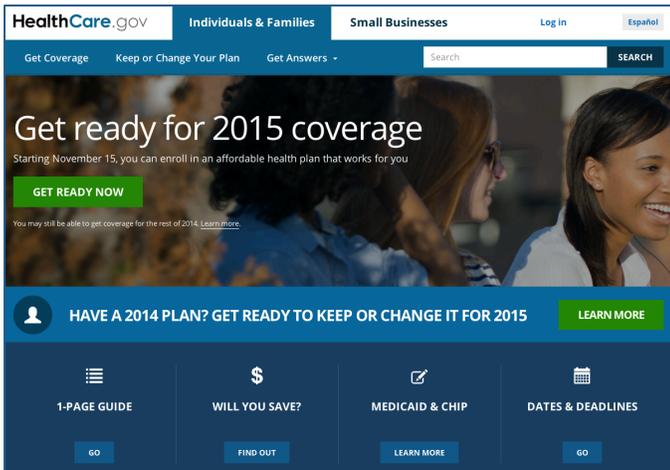
GSA’s 18F team touts itself as “An Open Source Team” throughout its website, and hosts many of its documents – including the TechFAR itself – on GitHub, a popular sharing and hosting website for the online open source development community.

Agile Processes for Digital Delivery

To move toward a more open model open for digital government, agencies should also reconsider how they obtain and leverage technology. Both the Digital Government Strategy and the TechFAR encourage greater flexibility through ‘agile’ contracting processes and procurement decisions.⁹ This includes considering how the requirements set during acquisition might affect the long-term sustainability and adaptability of digital government services.

The Digital Government Strategy promotes a ‘Shared Platform’ approach to obtaining digital services, with the end goal of empowering users to “innovate with less.”¹⁰ This includes the use of open source solutions and specifications that reduce duplication by giving agencies the ability to reuse and release software and data to other agencies as well as the general public. This methodology works especially well for iterative and public-facing services – the TechFAR cites irs.gov and healthcare.gov as examples¹¹ – because it allows agencies to make changes over time and maintain greater control over information systems.

The federal government has already made significant strides in achieving some of the goals laid out in this area of the Digital Government



The TechFAR specifically calls out healthcare.gov as an example of a public-facing government service that would particularly benefit from the use of open source technologies.

Strategy, including establishing a governmentwide platform for mobile device management.¹² Furthermore, 60 percent of federal leaders surveyed by GBC say their agencies have worked internally to consolidate duplicative IT systems.¹³ However, agencies still have significant room to improve when it comes to eliminating duplication governmentwide. Only 42 percent of federal leaders say that their agencies have worked with other government agencies to consolidate systems.¹⁴ While looking to address these discrepancies, agencies can specify technical requirements during the acquisition process that also promote the openness and cross-utilization of data over multiple organizations.

Moving Forward

Just as digital services have already begun revolutionizing the way agencies deliver on their mission, fully realizing the benefits of digital services may require significant shifts in how the federal government operates and views its technological assets. As agencies continue making strides in digital progress, attaining goals of greater openness and interoperability will increasingly require agencies to adopt agile and iterative procurement processes. Together, these changes can allow agencies to more effectively accomplish their missions and more readily adapt to shifting paradigms.

About GBC

Government Business Council (GBC), the research arm of Government Executive Media Group, is dedicated to advancing the business of government through analysis and insight. GBC partners with industry to share best practices with top government decision-makers, understanding the deep value inherent in industry's experience engaging and supporting federal agencies. Contact Zoe Grotophorst, Manager of Research & Strategic Insights, Government Business Council, at zgrotophorst@govexec.com. For more information, please visit: www.govexec.com/gbc.

About Acquia

Acquia provides solutions that enable agencies to optimize digital government strategies and innovate to transform the business of government. We help agencies create digital experiences with greater agility, resiliency, and reliability and securely deliver mission-essential information and citizen services faster and more efficiently.

Sources

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- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Images: 18F website (<https://18f.gsa.gov/>), healthcare.gov