GOING DIGITAL

What it Means to Become a Modern Government: In Brief

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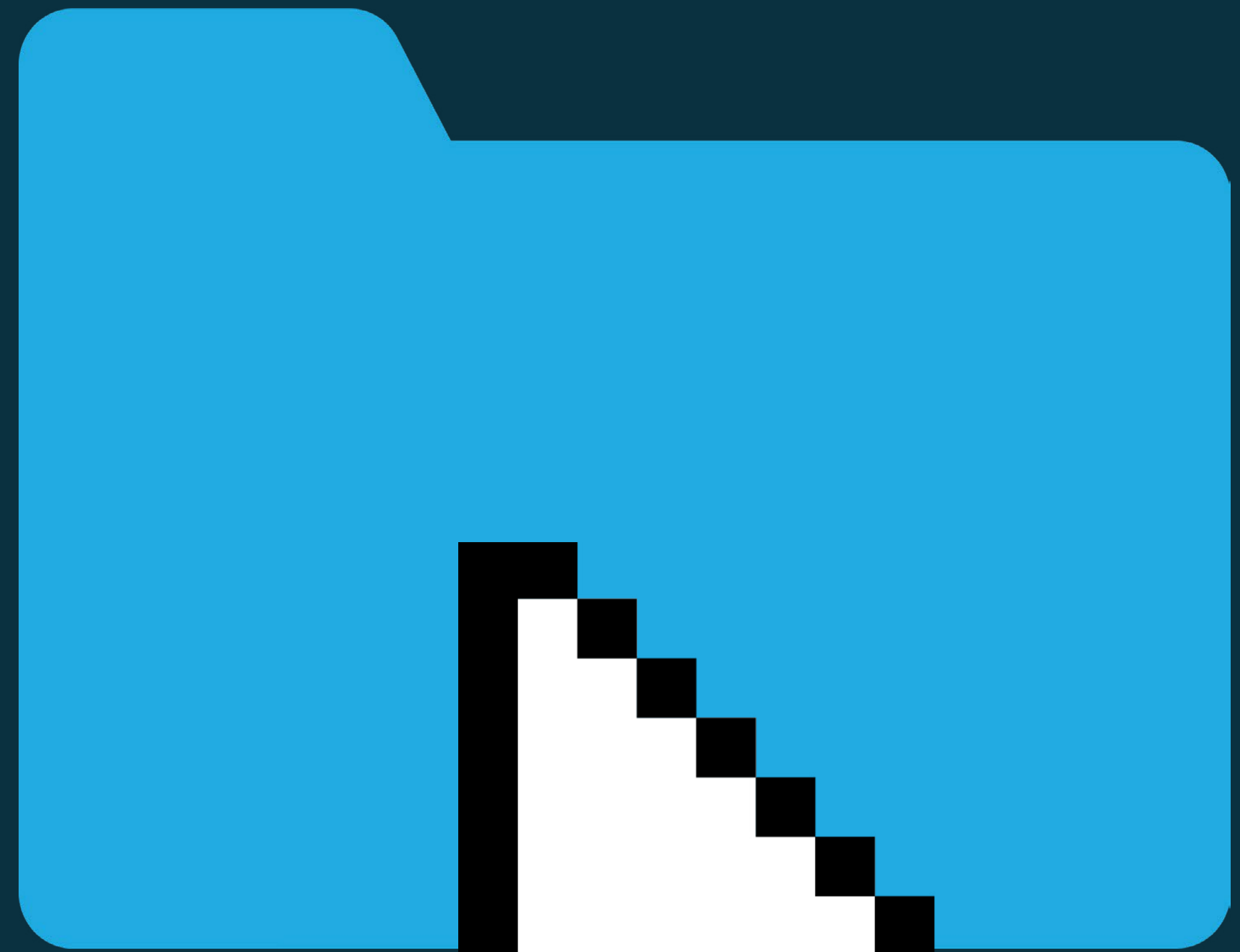
Executive Summary

You hear it all the time: Governments are going digital. But what exactly does a digital transformation entail? Well, it depends on whom you ask. For some, it's about making websites more modern and user-friendly. For others, it's about digitizing internal processes, whether that's time and attendance sheets for employees or the approval process for routing documents that require multiple signatures. Or maybe your office doesn't use the term digital transformation at all. That's OK. Digital transformation is about doing, and chances are your agency or office is in the thick of it. Whether or not you have a direct role in digital efforts at your agency, every employee plays a part and should understand how technology is changing the nature of their jobs and the communities they serve.

What Is Digital Transformation?

Digital transformation can be defined as a way to enhance employee functions or citizen services so that users can easily access them from anywhere, at any time and with any device. Regardless of how digital transformation is carried out at your organization, the focus must be on the human experience. Agencies have to balance the needs of training or reskilling the workforce to manage those services, improving the customer experience for all users, and incorporating any new technologies into the organization.

"Digital transformation is more than a matter of IT modernization. Rather than simply upgrading outdated technology, agencies need to develop an infrastructure that actually improves the capabilities of the workforce and performance of the workforce."

Guy Cavallo,
Deputy CIO,
Small Business
Administration

In a recent online poll, we asked the GovLoop community about digital transformation efforts at their agency. Nearly half of respondents — **45%** — said digital transformation is happening, while **19%** said it's not, **24%** said they are unsure, which could mean they are not directly involved or the impact of transformation has yet to permeate the agency.

Digital Transformation: Then and Now

2001
National Association of State Chief Information Officers shifts its focus.

December 2002
E-Government Act of 2002 becomes law, promoting secure and electronic government functions.

May 2012
The Obama administration launches the Digital Government Strategy.

August 2014
United States Digital Service (USDS) officially launches.

April 2017
American Technology Council (ATC) is established.

December 2017
Congress passes the Modernizing Government Technology (MGT) Act, creating the Technology Modernization Board and authorizing agencies to create working capital funds.

March 2018
The Trump administration releases the President's Management Agenda, highlighting IT modernization and more strategic uses of government data.

December 2018
Trump signs the 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act (IDEA) into law, requiring agencies to digitize forms, modernize websites and expand use of e-signatures.

A 360° View of Digital Transformation

Here we highlight benefits and challenges of digital transformation from the perspective of those going through it.

Rajive Mathur

CIO, Social Security Administration

Benefits
In fiscal 2017, the most recent numbers available, the public completed 155 million transactions using the Social Security Administration (SSA) website. Also, the agency's digital backbone took a quantum leap when it increased the network bandwidth capacity of additional field offices.

Challenges
SSA's core systems are more than 30 years old and rely on COBOL, a programming language created in the 1950s. Many of SSA's experienced IT employees are approaching retirement age, and newer employees, although talented, oftentimes don't have in-depth knowledge about the older, existing systems.

Ricky Santiago

Innovation Programs Manager, Office of Performance Improvement & Innovation, Louisville

Benefits
Building data and technology platforms that ready the government for the community's digital future is a big focus in Louisville, Kentucky. It's a three-pronged, integrated approach focused on residents having the right tools at the right price point and the understanding to effectively use them.

Challenges
As communities such as Louisville become more digital, the pace of change is often too fast for all residents to keep up. Cities must consider the underconnected. Twenty-eight percent of households in Louisville don't have access to fixed internet, and 22% don't have access to a home computer.

Case Study: Cutting Bureaucratic Tape to Bring Better Services to Veterans

On average, the Veterans Affairs Department (VA) receives 1.7 million forms a year from veterans applying for disability compensation and related benefits. Sixty percent, or more than 1 million, are received in the mail. For veterans, the paperwork involved in these forms delays the time until they receive their benefits, and forms that are received in the mail are especially laborious. Veterans have to wait an average of 100 days for forms to be processed, and many forms can take far longer. The answer came in the form of a machine learning solution that could identify disabilities from root words and classify them. Six months after starting the project in January 2019, the solution reached its final test. The team's run-through during the last stage of development showed a 92% accuracy rate for correctly classifying disabilities from paper applications, meaning that VA should save more than the $20 million leaders hoped for and veterans will have to spend less time waiting for the processing of benefits forms.
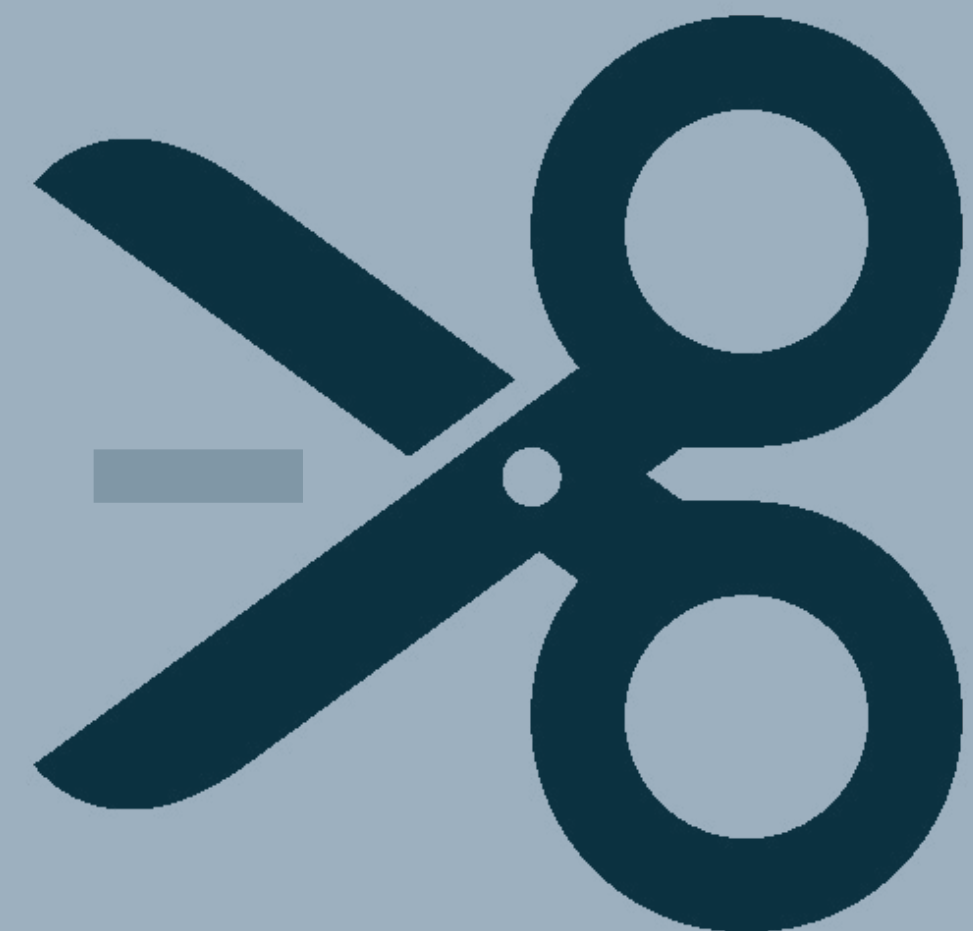
1.7 million
forms for disability compensation and related benefits are sent to the VA each year.

60%
of those forms are sent via mail.

Cut
Copy
Paste

Q&A: Library of Congress Director of Digital Strategy

Imagine being responsible for elevating the digital planning and initiatives for the largest library in the world. For Kate Zwaard, Director of Digital Strategy at the Library of Congress (LOC), that is both her reality and passion. Zwaard is spearheading a collaborative three-year directional plan that harnesses technology to bridge geographical divides, expands LOC's reach and enhances its services. She has a small team of five people that collaborates with Library staff to tackle massive projects and serve millions of visitors. Read the full interview here.

Contacts   Edit

**Kate Zwaard**
Director of Digital Strategy, LOC
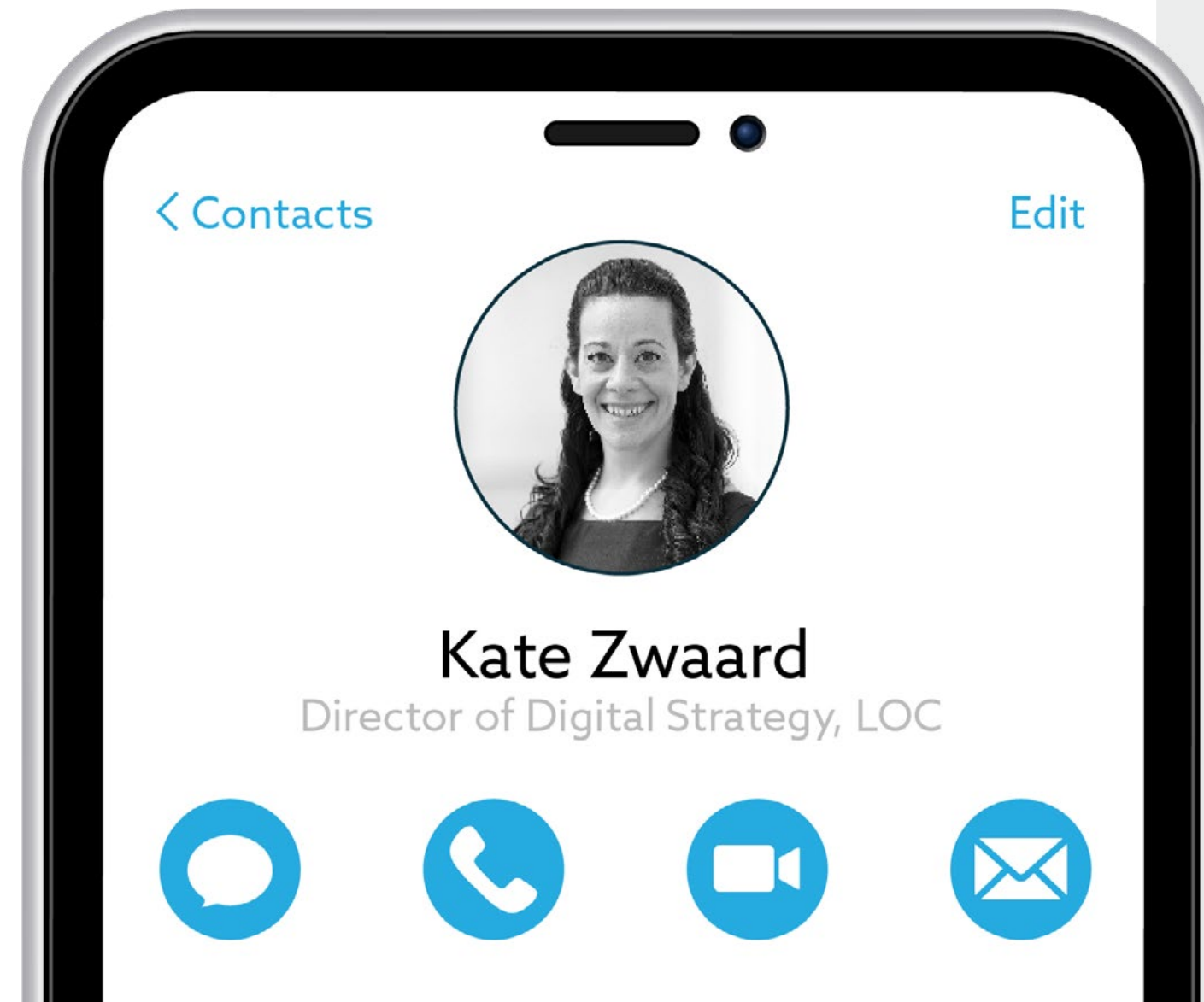
What's your elevator pitch about the digital transformation work happening at LOC?

We're thinking about ways that people are using computers to do computational analysis. We want to enable that research by making sure our collections are available in machine-readable ways, that we are providing access to our material through APIs [application programming interfaces] and other bulk data interfaces. The second big section of the digital strategy is about connecting. The vision of the Library of Congress is that all Americans are connected to the Library of Congress. And we think technology's going to be a really important part of that. We want to be where people are asking questions.

Tips for Communicating & Advocating for Digital Transformation

- When you're communicating digital transformation, make sure to answer this question for your intended audience: What's in it for me? Whatever change you're communicating, always follow up and explain it immediately.

- Don't take no for an answer. If you firmly believe in a transformational project and that it's going to be a useful tool to resolve problems or stop problems from happening, don't take no for an answer.

- Create a feedback loop. Whether it's a town hall, Slack channel, suggestion box or open-door policy that invites regular feedback, provide a mechanism for sharing and receiving ideas.
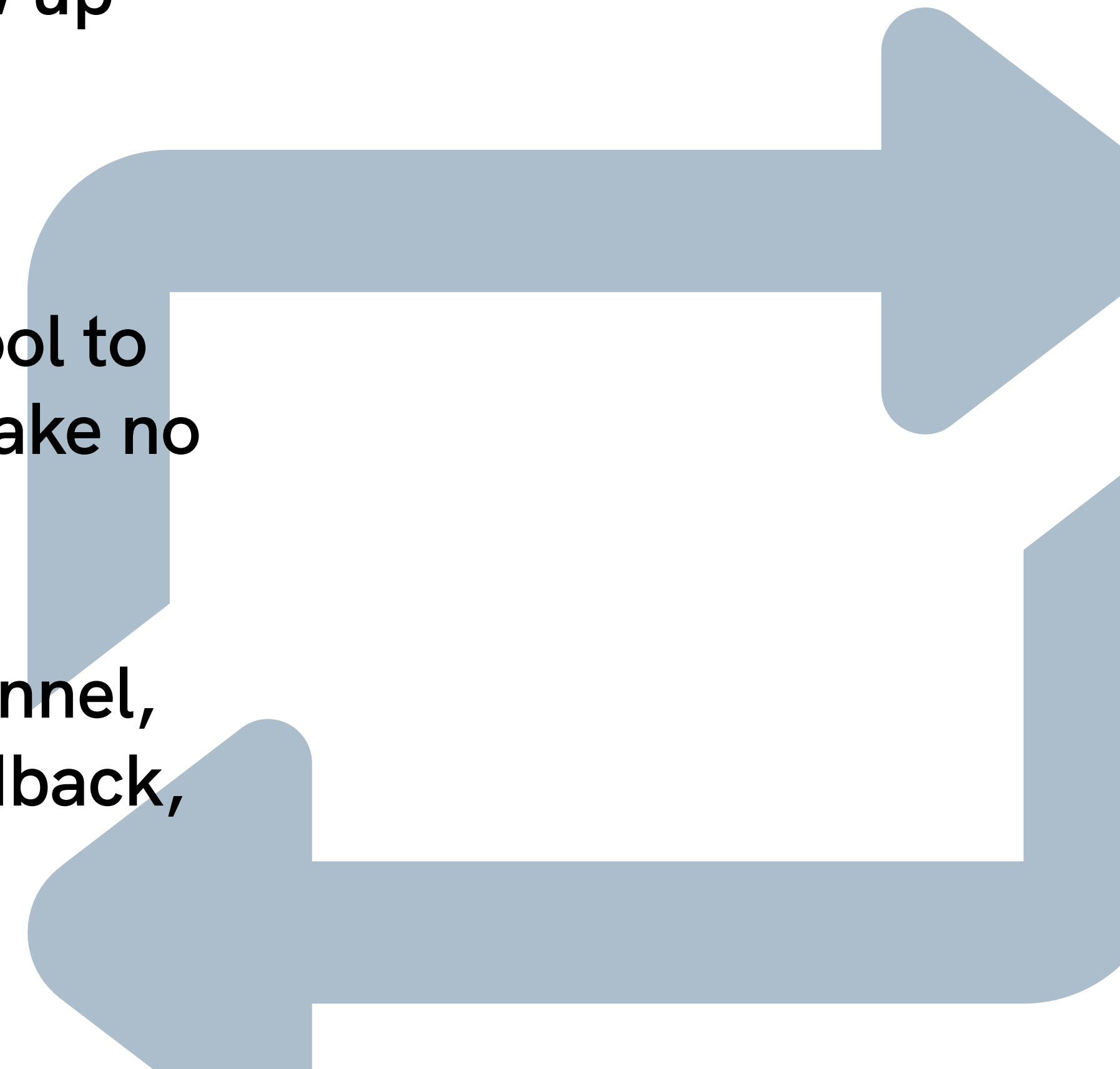
Tips for Tracking Benefits & Showing Progress

- Data analytics can be a powerful tool to track progress, but there must be agreed upon metrics that are presented to decision-makers in a meaningful way.

- When presenting data to decision-makers, don't let the data steal the show. Don't show data without providing context, leaving it to tell its own story.

- The fundamental step is trying to understand who your customers are and mapping their journey across the life cycle of interactions with your agency.

How ThunderCat Technology & VMware Can Help

Change can be scary, and many agencies are reluctant to leave their legacy IT behind. Leaders at these agencies often worry that modernizing IT could drive up their costs or alter employees' routines. In recent years, this wariness has become a frequent obstacle to cloud adoption. But the rise of hybrid cloud as a viable option is helping agencies realize that cloud isn't an all-in transformation. For example, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) uses cloud to increase its web services in the days leading up to Tax Day and then immediately reduces them minutes afterward. Hybrid clouds can ease the growing pains some agencies experience with modernization by combining legacy and modernized IT in one cloud package. Companies such as VMware and ThunderCat Technology provide the on-premise hardware and the off-premise cloud services that enable hybrid clouds no matter where agencies' data resides.

"The challenge with adopting cloud is that agencies don't think about turning things off or how they are able to consume the native services offered by a cloud service provider. They're not used to the elasticity and being able to grow demand."

- Nic Perez, Chief Technology Officer at ThunderCat Technology

Thank you to ThunderCat Technology and VMware for their support of this valuable resource for public sector professionals.