

Myth Busting: Data and User Research in Government

Data Spotlight



Underwritten by



Introduction

What comes to mind when you hear the word “data?” Think of it in the context of your everyday workflows and responsibilities.

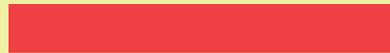
Maybe you’re inundated by it, afraid of it, not sure what to do with it, or very comfortable using data to make decisions and inform those around you. Perhaps you fall somewhere in the middle depending on the type of data and how you’re using it.

Regardless of where you are, one thing is certain: Having clarity around how data can be used and gathered and having a shared understanding of how to interpret it is critical. Plus, we know that the GovLoop community expects data-driven decision-making to be among the top priorities for the Biden administration.

In January 2021, we surveyed 413 people. Here's what they said when asked what they see as the top tech and management priorities for the new administration.

** The cumulative score reflects the different rankings assigned by respondents.*

#1 Diversity, equity & inclusion (cumulative score: 1,091)



#2 Upskilling, reskilling employees (921)



#3 Cybersecurity (813)



#4 Data-driven decision-making (780)



In the absence of clarity, our relationship with data can be shaped by limiting beliefs and even well-intended assumptions.

Everything from user research to the narrative around digital modernization and cost savings can be skewed. In this resource, we highlight two interviews that unpack the limiting beliefs in these areas and how you can reframe the conversation.

Conducting user research

An interview with

Cyd Harrell is an independent civic design consultant and author of “A Civic Technologist’s Practice Guide.” Her background is rooted in the user research discipline, and she has also worked in product management. Much of her work focuses on bringing both design and product management practice to people in government who make those kinds of decisions.



Limiting belief:
Government organizations can't do user research.

What's at stake: You really miss a connection with your constituents around the service that you're building or providing, and that can lead to a lot of things, including employee discouragement, if people don't see how improvements that they're making affect the actual public, or difficulty in management making decisions because they don't have good information.

What's missing from the conversation: I really believe that everybody who makes design decisions — and you could say the same for product decisions — deserves to have design practice and design communities. There are a lot of public servants making what are actually design decisions: how to present something to the public, how to design a digital product or a digital service. Even people who write communications or signage for use for the public are making design decisions. They have great instincts and a lot of smarts, but may not have had exposure to design practice or design community.

- **Acknowledge the discomfort:** That's a real thing. You may be told information about how your product or service works that is unpleasant, and I think one of the important things to recognize is that if you are in a career government position, you can get in trouble for that. That's a career risk. And so taking that on requires supportive management.
- **Shift your mindset:** It requires a shift sometimes in mindset toward being excited to find out that information and using it to get better. Sometimes

there's a political appointee in charge who doesn't understand or who is very rigorous about the way that they evaluate people against goals. The idea of getting bad feedback from the public, which is a pretty universal result of any user research study, is legitimately risky.

Reframe the conversation: What I try to do is make a safe way for them to experience the process and show them the values through doing that. Invite them to do a dry run of your protocol with an alumnus of the organization. In convincing people that it's worth doing research, get really clear on those research questions and show how your research plan leads to getting that valuable answer to those questions.

Talking points to cut through red tape

Communicate your work. Sometimes demonstration sessions are not the first step. Be transparent about your protocols, what questions you're going to ask and how you'll do it, how people can immediately opt out if they don't want to participate in research, how the information is presented to participants, and more.

If you get permission to run a small study, or a big study, share with your broader team at the end of every day what you did. You might say, “Here are some of the interesting things that we found out, and we'll be enlightening this more later.”



AlphaSix Corporation is a data management company. Our mission is to provide targeted IT solutions to the Federal Government that enables management of data and IT infrastructure while improving operations, understanding threats, and reducing costs.

Learn more at alphasixcorp.com.

Big Data & Analytics

Cyber Security

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Read our new report: *Big Data: Accelerating Time to Mission-Critical Insights*

Watch our free online course: *Extracting Mission-Critical Knowledge From Big Data*

4 Steps to Take Your Agency From Information to Insights

An interview with Mark Hughes, Chief Strategy Officer, and Stephen Moore, Chief Technical Officer, AlphaSix

There's no denying the benefits of big data in government. So why, then, does it feel like an aspirational goal for even the most well-intentioned organizations?

For one, charting the course from information to evidence-based insights requires a clear vision. There must be senior-level commitment to overcome organizational inertia, or the tendency to do what's always been done, said Stephen Moore, Chief Technical Officer at AlphaSix, a data management firm.

Chief Strategy Officer Mark Hughes added that leading data-driven modernization isn't without challenges. But these efforts should be seen as an attainable outcome for agencies, he said, citing the IRS and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as examples.

"[Modernization] doesn't have to be daunting," Hughes said. "But at the same time, don't buy a tool or fancy software package thinking that you have modernized. It won't be successful. You have to do the foundational work, such as identifying outcomes, potential use cases and stakeholders."

Here are some practical tips for moving from information to insights at your agency.

1. Know the end goal

It's critical that you clearly identify how any new investments contribute to your larger goal.

"In the past, we've seen organizations buy and install new technology without understanding how and if that technology would be used," Moore said. "They ended up with a bunch of blinking lights in the data center, but they didn't really have anybody invested in making use of it."

2. Prioritize security

Security can't be an afterthought. It must be an integral part of every step of your modernization journey, from who has access to what data and systems to how information is securely shared.

3. Embrace an adaptable framework

There isn't one silver bullet for analyzing and making sense of data. But an adaptable analytic framework is the starting point for extracting more value from big data today and preparing for a data-driven future.

"You don't have to lock data into black box systems or rebuild how you collect, process and store data for every new visualization tool you want to use," Moore said. Data will change over time, but the analytical framework you use can evolve and grow as needed.

4. Plan for professional development

As data needs and capabilities evolve within your agency, employees should also be well-positioned to support those changes. Hughes recommends using a staffing matrix that provides clear paths for growth opportunities, whether that be IT staff or nontechnical employees developing their data skills.

"Big data can be made easy," Hughes said, citing successful partnerships that AlphaSix has had with agencies such as the CDC. What started as a project to better store data evolved into a larger modernization effort. That positively impacted the culture around data and expanded career opportunities for employees.

The ultimate goal is helping agencies capture, secure and leverage strategic data assets to transform their information into timely, meaningful insights.

Digital Modernization and Cost Savings

An interview with

Bryan Shone, PhD, is the Director of Policy, Resources and Analysis in the Office of the Chief Information Officer, Headquarters Department of the Army. In his role with the Army, Shone uses data and analytics to enable informed decision-making to support digital modernization.



Limiting belief:

The primary goal of digital modernization is to reduce costs.

The backstory: When I arrived in the Army, the talking points revolving around cloud computing were focused primarily on how migrating data and applications to the cloud would immediately reduce costs to the Army. As Army senior leaders spoke with industry partners and operators about the potential of moving data and applications to the cloud, the discussion quickly shifted from a simple “lift and shift” of data to reduce costs to the importance of cultivating decision-making at all echelons to improve mission effectiveness and enhance security of our data.

Mixed messages: We conducted a messaging campaign to describe the renewed motives associated with migrating data and applications to the cloud. This shift was reflected in broader federal government discussions pertaining to the transition from Cloud First to Cloud Smart concepts. This has required us to develop a compelling business case that helps the Army enterprise understand that cloud migration is not driven by the desire to reduce costs, but more to improve effectiveness and security.

The reality is: The Army’s digital modernization vision is centered on the concept that data will increasingly be used as the primary ammunition

for the future fight. Setting the conditions and establishing the infrastructure to posture the Army for success in this future fight will require investments up front. The Army must reprioritize its existing resources to afford these near-term investments.

Areas for improvement: We need to focus on divesting legacy systems and underperforming programs to free up resources for modernized capabilities. We must analyze software and hardware usage rates and their overall utility, and then prioritize those key enablers in accordance with the Army’s priority missions. We must also examine as-a-service models to determine where the Army can leverage industry expertise to deliver more effective and secure solutions.

What’s at stake: If we truly want to modernize the Army, difficult decisions will need to be made. Not only are significant amounts of resources at stake, but — more importantly — the effectiveness of our Army is at stake. The effectiveness of our future Army will be directly linked to our ability to maintain decision superiority at echelon.



New way of thinking: For the last 18 months, communications across the Army as it pertains to cloud computing and digital modernization have become much more accurate and consistent. Leaders understand that digital modernization — just like any other critical capability set — will require a reprioritization of resources. The Army is identifying ways to harvest savings through IT category management and IT investment accountability to reallocate resources to our top digital modernization priorities.

Rethinking traditional processes: Digital modernization does not always conform to traditional processes used by the government. For example, upgrading our digital collaboration tools during COVID-19 has required the Army to flex on a monthly basis to the latest technological advancements and customer demands. This required us to leverage Agile acquisition approaches. Digital modernization will always be a continuous process.

Developing the right team: Modernization spans all aspects of an organization. Leaders who are truly committed to propelling modernization expand far beyond chief information officers. In the Army, for example, there is a dedicated command for modernization — Army Futures Command. Also, chief data officers have become more important given the increased reliance on data and analytics.

The bottom line: Modernization — particularly digital modernization — is not solely a cost savings endeavor. Just as it takes a reprioritization of resources to modernize an aircraft or a tank, it takes a reprioritization of resources to modernize our digital infrastructure. To say that digital modernization is purely a cost-savings initiative is a myth.

Next Steps

Ultimately, what makes data powerful is the insights we glean from it. Those insights are foundational for designing a more modern government that works for all and not some – and one that empowers public servants to make sound and timely decisions.

If you found this resource helpful, check out our full guide, [“Agency of the Future: Common Misconceptions Holding You Back and How to Break Free.”](#) We explore other aspects of a modern government, including hiring and budgeting, and how to change the narrative around limiting beliefs.



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