

# Transformation Initiatives: Off the Drawing Board and Into Practice

Agencies have a responsibility to transform.

While the private sector moves forward quickly, improvements in government can seem slow and weak. Naturally, agencies face many challenges in launching transformation initiatives. So how do they push forward?

At a [recent GovLoop event](#), experts spoke about how agencies can step up their pace in moving ideas from the drawing board into the real world.

## Speakers

**Adam Leonard**, Chief Analytics Officer and Director of Information Innovation and Insight, Texas Workforce Commission

**Jacqueline Ponti-Lazaruk**, Chief Innovation Officer for USDA Rural Development

**Luis Tapia**, Senior Manager, Solutions Architecture, Amazon Web Services

*“Establish that value proposition early in the process.”*

**Jacqueline Ponti-Lazaruk**

## Small Constant Steps

Agencies need to align their improvements with constituent expectations.

“If we are not innovating, then we are not meeting our customers’ needs or improving them,” said Leonard.

A total transformation or “rethinking of everything we do,” in Leonard’s words, might only occur once every 10 years, but agencies can continue to roll out initiatives that are responsive to some of the new priorities much more frequently.

“Think big, start small, scale fast,” echoed Tapia.

Change can begin in a variety of ways, the panelists found. While transformation is often about technology, it doesn’t always have to be.

## Collaborate on Business Process

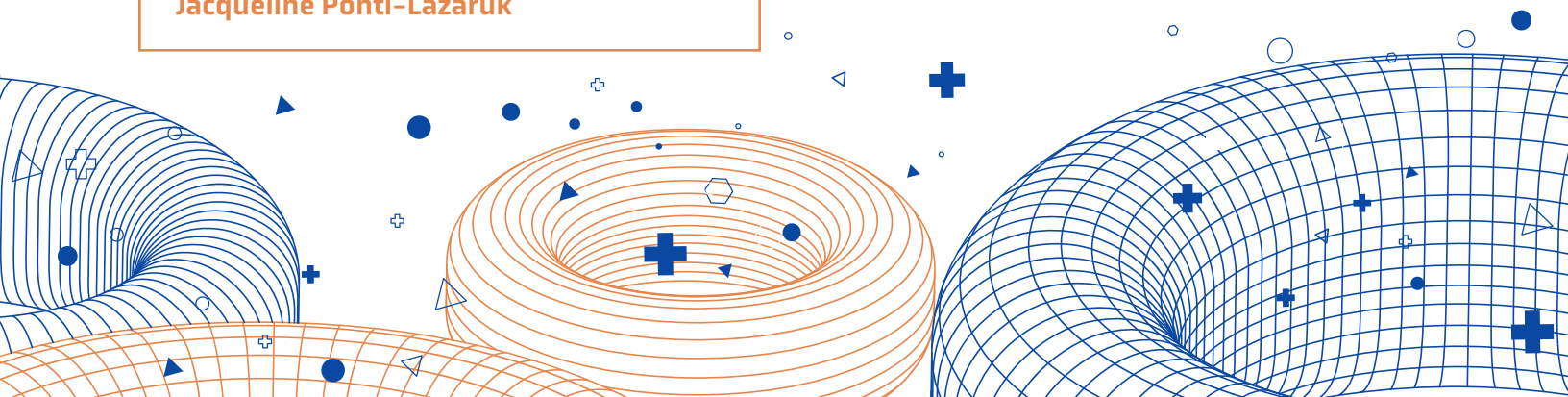
The customer experience — and how updated it is — is often a reflection of business processes.

As Leonard said, “transformation can be done just by doing simple business process analysis, understanding where the constraints in your process are, where the errors are creeping in.”

At the Texas Workforce Commission, he saw a 1,400% increase in unemployment claims for nontraditional workers in 2020. While implementing changes to increase bandwidth, his team realized that the program was vulnerable to data breaches.

“We had to build from the ground up a whole new system for detecting identity fraud... We really examined the business processes, who did what, and how we could layer in different checks and points of the process without slowing down the experience of a legitimate claim,” said Leonard.

By involving a variety of individual departments focused on fraud, data analytics and IT, his team was able to redesign its process for better service.



## Re-envision Your Role for Constituents

While transformation can flip an entire process on its head, it can also be a new vision of an agency's work and approach to constituent engagement.

For instance, at USDA's Rural Development office, Ponti-Lazaruk's team changed its thinking about how to review loan applications.

"Starting from that customer perspective and really identifying who our customer was in that process ... what we found is that this holistic approach is really important," she said.

Her staff contemplated their work in terms of what impact they wanted and what their roles should be, rather than what their duties had become through existing processes.

Viewing it through a lens of "if we were going to make this from scratch," she said, made change a more transformative process.

*"Very simplistically, government transformation is about improving your agency to better meet the needs of the citizens."*

**Luis Tapia**

## Balance Security and Risk

Security teams should be involved from the very beginning of any change or transformation.

"Baking it into the overall transformation is going to be super critical to the success of that initiative," said Tapia. Understanding the risks and the security and compliance requirements early means that you can plan for or proactively manage them, he explained.

The risk process, Ponti-Lazaruk said, relates to addressing key challenges, performing constituent work and being able to pause and pivot if needed. "Especially in a crisis," she noted, "if there's something that happens that needs to take precedence, you have to be conscious of that."

Leonard observed that security will be especially important as agencies progress in their use of AI — learning its strengths and its weaknesses.

In an environment where innovation is often stymied by risk, awareness and preparation free you up to become more creative.

## Metrics Spell the Future

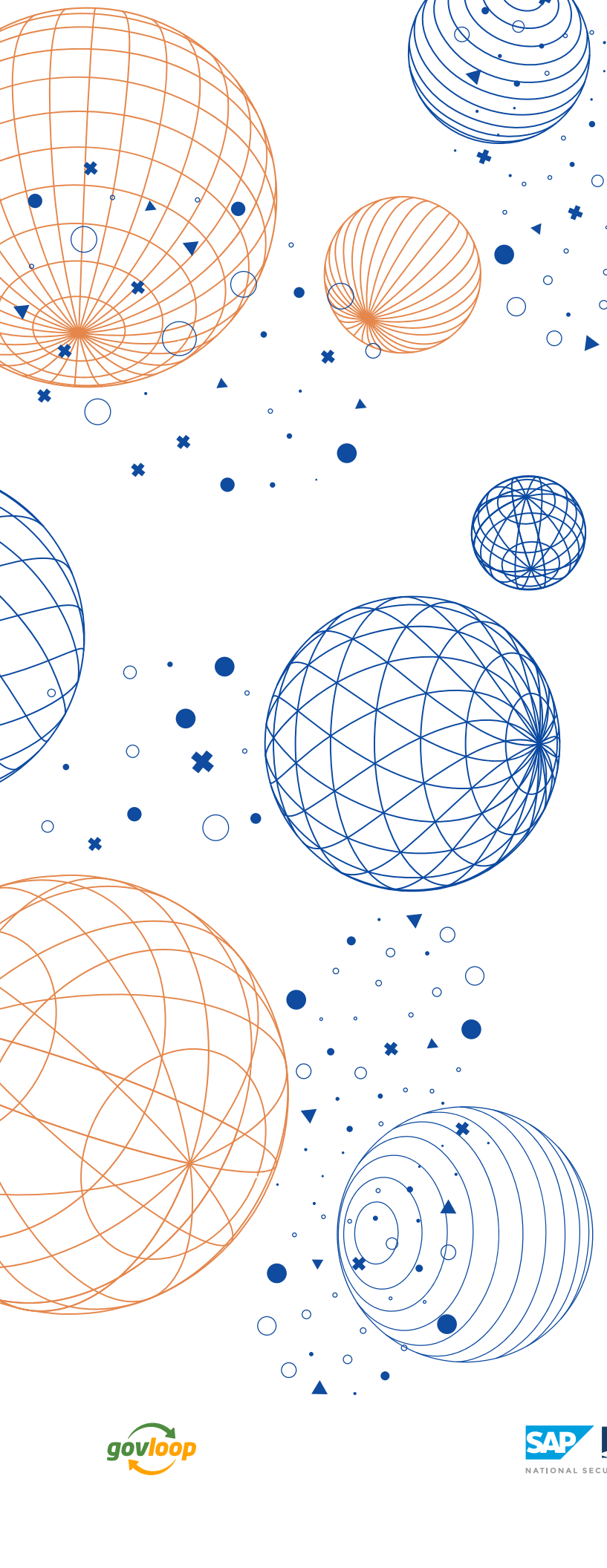
Metrics aren't just numbers. They're about reaching goals.

"We always start with metrics up front," said Ponti-Lazaruk. Embedding metrics into key performance indicators "tethers them to the agency and the process and keeps us tracking them over the long-term."

Transformation processes take place over a set period of time, but information that emerges from them continues to inform an agency, especially for course correction. Tracking metrics is useful when a transformation process gets interrupted.

"A way to keep attention on it is to have key performance indicators that are tracked and visual up the leadership chain," said Ponti-Lazaruk.

At her agency, there were doubts about its programs' ability to serve some communities, but the metrics revealed what was possible, rather than just continuing what happened in the past.



## Communicate, Empathize, Engage

- The panelists stressed communication across departments, with stakeholders and with constituents. Buy-in from all three is crucial in enacting transformation because change-resistance can hold things up at any turn.
- For employees, resistance comes from fear of a changing work environment. For that reason, Ponti-Lazaruk said leaders should “try to import as much empathy as you can into the process.... If they sense that you understand where they’re coming from, and you give them a little space to lean into your value proposition, they will.”

All three panelists stressed the importance of practicing and promoting flexibility, making the environment safe for experimentation and learning.

“Take an agile and iterative approach,” said Tapia — especially when priorities may change. He also encouraged celebrating small wins, acknowledging employees for good work, recognizing efforts and sharing news. “The more you do that, the more likely your transformation initiative is to be successful,” he said.

*“You have to work to find a reason to say yes ... You have to be creative, you have to be collaborative.”*

**Adam Leonard**

**Click [here](#) to view the online training.**