



## Elevating the human experience in government services

### Lessons from the United States

The Government of the United States issued an executive order in late 2021 that aims to improve citizens' interactions with government services. Governments around the world and across Canada can learn from it to improve how they serve their people—and rebuild trust in the process. [➔](#)

## Focusing on the human experience An opportunity for government services

Governments around the world are committed to going digital. Some have created digital delivery units and are adopting agile, user-centric ways of working. Some are systematically using new technologies to modernize their services. Many are finding success in designing services around diverse human experiences, using service excellence to create efficiencies and drive inclusion.

Despite these successes, many efforts to drive digital government are ad hoc and restricted to specific service experiences. Governments now have an opportunity to mainstream their digitization efforts. How can they create sustainable, inclusive processes that elevate the human experience as they adopt new technologies? Some are choosing ambitious policy measures that establish new expectations for service excellence. One such example is from the United States.

On December 13, 2021, US President Joe Biden signed [Executive Order 14058: Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government](#). For many public sector leaders, it's an exciting policy measure. This executive order (EO) establishes that the policy of the US government is to ground itself in customer needs and experience, with a particular focus on improving the equity of service delivery. One section identifies 35 near-term, high-priority action areas, including digitizing passport renewals, tax payments, social security benefit claims, and farm loan applications. Another section establishes an accountability framework for those service providers that have a significant number of transactions per year, serve a large portion of the American public, or have an outsized impact on the lives of those they serve, such as social service providers. It also establishes a new framework for more integrated service delivery through interagency collaboration on designated life experiences, such as social service provisions, births, marriages, and deaths.



### Customer experience lessons for Canada

This transformative order from the highest level of government in the United States signalled a clear change in how it intends to own the full delivery chain and provide quality services and experiences.

Given the importance of such a policy measure, Deloitte Canada and the Institute of Public Administration of Canada (IPAC) decided to collaborate to bring the conversation north of the border, to the screens of digital and customer experience leads across all levels of government. On March 24, 2022, Deloitte and IPAC hosted an intimate virtual session with deputy ministers, assistant deputy ministers, executive directors, chief innovation officers, chief data officers, senior policy advisors, and more from federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal governments, as well as industry and academic leaders.

The session comprised an overview of the EO by a senior US government official in customer experience, a summary of the state of play in Canada from a senior Canadian official, and an open discussion. This article recaps the event and the key takeaways.

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## US Executive Order 14058: An overview

The US vision for customer experience, as set out in the EO, focuses on providing simple, seamless, and secure experiences for the public.

The federal government is the country's largest employer, purchaser, and provider of services. As such, it's a complex service delivery organization. The guest US official highlighted the challenges it faces in carrying out those services.

The EO outlines a theory of change that's rooted in the recognition that the negative experiences individuals have when engaging with government services have contributed to the disintegration of trust Americans have in their government. It was noted that, too often, citizens have lost opportunities and access to services or benefits because of the way those services were being provided.

Ultimately, this is a cost to the nation. The concept of a "time tax" was prioritized in the EO in response to the significant administrative burden experienced by both internal and external customers. For example, people collectively spent 11 billion hours on administrative tasks related to federal forms in 2021.

The EO seeks to provide a more structured management framework, establishing the Office of Management and Budget (roughly equivalent to Canada's Treasury Board Secretariat) as a central owner of customer experience measures; routines for service designation, assessment, and action planning; cross-agency (and level of government) human experiences; and resolving issues, such as a lack of data-sharing or ownership.

To develop the EO, the US government learned from multiple pilots, its ongoing digital modernization efforts, the work of innovative teams, and the implementation of [government-wide customer experience guidance](#) (first established in 2018) to understand which core pieces were important to lift up and codify through this mechanism. Those working on the policy:



### Identified core service providers that "lift all boats"

Improving service delivery and customer experience across an organization as big as the US government is a daunting task. A practical approach was to focus on building capacity in [35 high-impact service providers](#) (HISPs) that represent a diverse set of service types and can act as the tip of the spear for improving representative agency services.



### Organized around a service unit

Improving the experience with the entire US Social Security Administration is different than improving specific request areas, such as replacing a social security card or applying for retirement benefits. Working with HISPs to define services enabled a more focused and manageable prioritization approach, with more nuanced improvements. It also helped to determine the level of specificity within the EO-codifying principles—such as human-centred design priorities—and the desired outcomes—such as improving post-transaction trust—while still creating space for flexibility and ongoing iteration from learning and adapting (how that is done will be unique to each agency and service).



### Collected customer feedback using comparable methods

Adopting more consistent approaches to collecting customer feedback—in a way that reduces burden, structures data in a more useful way, and allows for comparisons with similar service types—can help to better identify moments that matter across the life cycle of a customer journey and provide a more complete understanding of end-to-end service journeys. The US government shares its [performance results](#) with the public and continues to refine its practices.



### Aligned customer experience activities with annual budget, strategic, and learning planning

Key to the success of service delivery and digitization efforts is hooking them to all the other planning that agencies are engaged in, especially budget planning. The EO aligns service assessment, customer feedback collection and reporting, and action planning to when agencies are conducting their (required by regulation) strategy, performance, and evidence planning and overall budgeting. This embeds formalized customer-experience plans, metrics, and desired outcomes.

In signing Executive Order 14058, the Biden-Harris Administration has placed a bold stake in the ground by detailing what agencies can and will deliver in the next two years, from online passport renewals and a simplified disaster-recovery experience to integrating Veterans Affairs services in one central application. However, it was the overall shift to managing government to respond to the needs of the people accessing its services and throughout their life experiences that makes this EO such a significant turning point in government service delivery. Its ambition is exemplified by the cross-cutting of services to meet the needs of seniors, who engage across a number of government services—demonstrating that, with this EO, seniors would no longer be faced with multiple entry points to meet their needs, but instead have a single, simple, and seamless experience.

The US customer-experience official noted that while a significant amount of planning is still required, Biden has put substantial weight on this initiative as part of his administration's overall [management strategy](#). Its priorities are to: strengthen and empower the federal workforce; deliver excellent, equitable, and secure federal services and customer experiences; and manage the business of government.

People collectively spent 11 billion hours on administrative tasks related to federal forms in 2021



### State of play in Canada

A senior Canadian official then outlined how the US experience aligns with recent efforts in this country. This included:

- The pandemic served to **push governments across Canada to act quickly**, prioritize their responses, and deliver services and benefits to Canadians in a far more expedited manner than was typical before the COVID-19 pandemic. The intent was to form a nexus of forces to provide better customer experiences by better allocating the resources required to deliver them successfully. That meant having the right people around the table to ensure the experiences were designed to meet a variety of needs.
- Governments also chose to **prioritize digital modernization** when delivering services and benefits. They focused on speed and accessibility, and then took the opportunity to re-evaluate and invest in the appropriate platforms, simplify cumbersome processes, and shift away from legacy systems.
- The nexus of resources and personnel also made governments **prioritize clarity**, favouring simplified service delivery over traditional, often-overcomplicated bureaucratic channels and processes.

In many ways, the pandemic's impact on how services are rolled out and delivered in Canada matches the desired outcomes of the EO in the United States by embodying a human-centred approach, with fast, seamless, and digitally focused customer experiences and journeys. In Canada, however, governments tended to focus inward—but are now prioritizing making their processes transparent to the public and offering a true end-to-end experience for customers.

The comparison concluded with the overall observation that the governments of the United States and Canada (and many others around the world) are trying to achieve essentially the same goals:

- To deliver a seamless and invisible service
- To develop and embody a strategy for digital government
- To address key internal roadblocks that prevent service improvement

This part of the session ended with a nod to the concept of the currency of trust, which highlights the need to continue working toward a customer-focused future and to demonstrate that progress to government employees, citizens, and would-be Canadians.

## Q&A

Jaimie Boyd, Deloitte Canada's Digital Government leader, moderated a discussion with the guest speakers based on audience questions.

**Q: How did the US government teams tasked with prioritizing high-impact areas choose them?**

**A:** The EO prioritized the service experience over the digital product. Some specific commitments do include digitization while others are rules- or process-based improvements, such as making pandemic-era flexibilities around telehealth services permanent. The central team worked directly with HISPs to identify the items (activities, regulations, etc.) that would help to unblock ongoing efforts or projects that had stalled for years due to lack of leadership engagement or agency focus.

Ultimately, a core component of the EO is the commitment to drive the government to focus on improving the building blocks required for many services to be successful, such as identity verification, account management, eligibility determination, communications, and payment applications. Apart from being a bureaucratic exercise, understanding which service components were critical to digitize during the pandemic was very important.

From the technology perspective, our governments are getting there—but the service experience is the essence of transformation. This starts with an improved understanding of customer journeys, collaboration, and horizontal accountability, regardless of organizational structure, and frameworks through which leaders can collaborate with their teams and across levels to provide improved services.

**Q: A large part of any transformation plan is ensuring that implementation is taken into account. When the EO was being developed, how did you ensure “policy” made its way in?**

**A:** The EO was grounded in the context of [Executive Order 13985: Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government](#). This also directs federal agencies to engage underserved communities, in particular throughout policy development and implementation.

A consistent finding made through this previous work in customer experience is that capacity within federal agencies for customer research and community engagement is severely lacking. Therefore, the policy findings and considerations were derived primarily from our findings from the previous EO and from our ongoing assessments.

## Final thoughts

**Executive Order 14058:** The guest US official described this as their team's "going to the moon" moment and a clear step for the United States toward make change before they even knew exactly how they might do it. Canada has a three-pronged starting point its neighbour did not have:

- 1 A public health system, with direct government touchpoints and a relationship with citizens, that provides a foundation of trust and data
- 2 Integrated service infrastructures, such ServiceOntario and ServiceCanada, that have a well-designed entry point for customers that can be built upon and scaled across other agencies and services
- 3 A tax form that also serves as a benefits application form, providing an accurate view into customer needs and enabling more proactive service provision

**State of play in Canada:** The Canadian official reiterated the importance of adopting clarity and purpose when reimagining service delivery, starting with refining communications and laying out clear and attainable outcomes. To genuinely push the envelope and develop a purpose-driven, customer-experience transformation, leadership needs to focus on acquiring and allocating the proper resources, ensuring the right people are involved in the decision-making and at the implementation table, and centring on the citizen and user.

## Want to know more? Let's talk.

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