

Title: DigitalGov Research Report 001: The people in government responsible for public services and the challenges that get in their way

Summary: A window into the people who work in technology in government and the challenges they face making that work stronger and more effective.

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## 001

### **Research Report**

The people in government responsible for public services and the challenges that get in their way

### **Research Synthesis / 001**

What we learned about the people responsible for public services in the government and the challenges that get in their way

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## **A note from the team**

Starting in early 2017, the DigitalGov team made a commitment to conduct ongoing user research as part of its mission to support the people in government responsible for modernizing technology and delivering efficient, effective public services.

Our research sprints will start with a statement of what we're setting out to learn and finish with a report written to benefit and inform the wider community of thinkers, problem solvers, technologists and tinkerers we serve.

This report is our first edition (001) — it is intended to be a window into the people who work in technology in government and the challenges they face making that work stronger and more effective. What are their formal (or informal) job titles and what are their roles within their agencies (and bureaus and offices)? Who do they interact with? What are the barriers or roadblocks they face?

And what do they need to dissolve those barriers, to work more effectively as teams within agencies and across government? How can they provide a higher level of service to their customers?

DigitalGov has a long-standing relationship with these people: many of them have read (or written!) a DigitalGov article, taken a DigitalGov University training course, participated in one of our government-wide communities, found information on a shared service, or used (or contributed to!) one of our community-driven or -focused resource guides.

So as we move toward a new DigitalGov, it was imperative that we ask ourselves: do we really know the problems our readers and their colleagues are trying to solve, the context that makes these problems so difficult to solve, or what they need to do their jobs better?

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## **What we discovered**

Over a six month span, we dedicated significant hours to conducting nearly two dozen interviews with federal members of our audience—content managers, designers, developers, innovation leaders—who are involved with all aspects of agencies' digital services.

After doing these interviews, we heard these feds need several things to be more successful in their work:

- Tools and resources
- Collaboration
- Examples of problems being solved in government

But, we found several barriers in their way:

- Not enough budget/resources/time
- Risk averse agency culture
- No seat at the table

- Not enough guidance/information

As we found in listening to them, they are working against incredible odds, and yet continuously exhibit a desire to be resourceful, perseverant, resilient. We should all be proud to call them civil servants.

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## **Questions we set out to answer**

### **What roles do these feds play at their agencies?**

- Where do they sit in the organizational hierarchy?
- What titles do they have?
- What projects they are responsible for?
- What jobs consume the vast amounts of their time?
- What other groups do they interact with?
- What is their day-to-day like?
- What are they looking to accomplish in their roles going forward?

### **Where do they see barriers/roadblocks to getting the work done at their agencies?**

### **What has been their experience with DigitalGov, and what would make it better?**

- What prompted their first visit to DigitalGov?
  - What information were they looking for?
  - Did they find it?
  - Have they been back?
  - What is your impression of DigitalGov (including communities, training/events, services, etc.)?
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## Why now?

Agencies are being called upon to work more efficiently and effectively, while government digital services continue to miss the mark.

We also wanted to take a hard look at what we offered on DigitalGov.gov, how we offered it and if these offerings were meeting the needs of our customers—the very ones responsible for delivering digital services in the government.

And as we move on to the next chapter of DigitalGov, we wanted to honor the site's many predecessors, and the trust our core customers have put in us to share government-specific information and resources, to help them do their jobs better.

As we found in listening to them, they are working against incredible odds, and yet seem to be resourceful, perseverant and resilient. We should all be proud to call them civil servants.

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## Who are they?

The people we spoke with work in areas of communication, innovation, design, development—they are involved with all aspects of digital service delivery. Most of them have been in government for more than five years, some as contractors and some as feds who have worked at more than one agency during their careers.

Some of them have access to tools and resources they need, but don't have time to dig deeply into areas of interest, while others wear many hats or do whatever's needed, but have to get creative to access the tools they need.

Some would like to have a seat at the table to better influence the work that gets done at their agencies, while others just want assurance they are doing their job correctly.

Some work at agencies so risk averse they feel their job is to launch services that don't endanger the agency.

Many admire the work of similar agencies who seem to be working smarter, and find examples of other feds succeeding the most effective tools for change.

They all want to be better connected to the larger government community, as not all the guidance or information trickles down—or out—to their spaces. They want to learn more, do more.

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## **What are their barriers?**

The people we interviewed have many barriers that prevent them from doing their best work for the public. The following are the barriers that were common across everyone we spoke with.

- Not enough budget/resources/time
- Risk averse agency culture
- No seat at the table
- Not enough guidance/information

## **Not enough budget/resources/time**

Many people we spoke to voiced an overall concern of not having enough budget, resources or time. Some of the interviewees spoke about functioning at their agencies as teams of one, or just a few, and have to be creative to get the resources they need. Others understand there are limited resources and rely on themselves to get things done.

We were told by some that they would like to spend time looking into larger issues, like various strategies, but that fails to happen when the day-to-day work is so time consuming.

Some had more help, but yet are so overburdened, they just don't have time to think beyond what needs to get done in the moment. While others may have teams, and understand modern practices, their teams don't have the necessary skills to do the work, as they have taken on these digital tasks in addition to their core jobs.

## **Resistant to change/risk averse agency culture**

Another major barrier we heard was that pockets in agencies have cultures that are resistant to change, or risk averse. We heard that in some offices where the average tenure is high, colleagues may be more resistant to change—at certain agencies, these employees had lived through previous tumultuous times with layoffs and other upheavals, so they learned to keep their heads down and not do anything perceived as risky.

In other departments, the profession held by many employees leads them to be more risk averse by nature, thus making it harder to affect change on a large scale.

Others are constrained by old ways of thinking or practices. In an office where documentation still has to be printed out and left on people's desks for approval, work slows down if people are out. They are trying to move to a more transparent system, but there's resistance both in the process and culture.

In some offices, it's even too burdensome to track down training help on newer collaborative tools, so they stick using what they know, even if it is more cumbersome. And even if they could get trained, their colleagues in other offices are using different software, so it isn't any easier to collaborate.

## **No seat at the table**

This next barrier we heard about was characterized by a feeling that work in the digital space is a less-valued part of an agency's mission. This sentiment is felt at many levels: from a lack of physical proximity, due to working in an office outside of

headquarters, to not being given authority to help make decisions that directly affect their work.

## **Not enough guidance/information to do their jobs**

This last barrier we found came from a need to search for more information to do their jobs better, as they found that guidance missing at their own agencies.

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# **What do they need?**

After speaking with all these people, it was apparent they need more support to better serve the public. We see that support falling into these main areas:

- Tools and Resources
- Collaboration
- Examples of problems being solved in government

## **Tools and Resources**

Even though many of them are not new to their fields, there is always more to learn, as the digital space keeps growing and changing. Also, after working in these fields for a while, many readers expressed a need for outside inspiration.

This information is crucial to modernizing services and much of it is government-specific, dealing with the various rules, regulations and policies.

They're interested in learning more about:

- |                           |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| • Accessibility           | • Strategy  |
| • Usability               | • Data Visualization  |
| • Analytics and Reporting | • Data Analysis   |
| • Agile/lean              | • Artificial Intelligence/Virtual Reality/Augmented Reality |
| • Marketing campaigns     |   |



- Social media

Many times they are feeling burdened and just need to find information that will give them the confidence to move forward and reassure them they have not missed anything.

Lastly, they need access to the tools and resources that will help them confidently take steps toward working smarter, iterating more frequently and delivering better, more effective services to the public.

## Collaboration

Working for federal agencies, many of them crave more opportunities to connect to peers across the government—or even with others in their own agencies—to share what they’ve learned, or learn from others’ experiences. They are interested in participating in spaces where people can more seamlessly communicate and share ideas between teams, with ‘points of contacts’ designated on various topics.

One interviewee even shared his experience, as a field office employee with an interest in learning more about usability practices. Through DigitalGov, and the related communities, he was introduced to someone *at his own agency* who he didn’t know and connected him to a larger usability effort at headquarters.

They want to know what has worked, how agencies solved problems and what they should aim for in similar efforts. As they are trying to follow modern practices they need help in convincing colleagues and find examples of other agencies’ success to be the most powerful tools. It helps others feel more comfortable adopting modern practices.

## Examples of problems being solved in government

They want more information that is specific to government—examples of what agencies are doing; case studies; collections of validated federal-wide news that has an impact on digital in one spot.

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## How do they want it?

They need concise pieces of information to share with others, whom they manage, or work with, and may not have as much knowledge on a particular topic. They need that information to be easily shareable, printable and easy to distribute.

This information can take the form of:

- well-organized and maintained lists of tools,
  - resources,
  - checklists
  - and short videos.
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## How we arrived at these conclusions

### Initial assumptions

Prior to doing these in-depth user interviews, we assumed we knew a little about the feds on the digital services front lines, as they had interacted with DigitalGov previously through our many channels, but we knew we needed to learn much more about them and their roadblocks.

We also knew there were areas of DigitalGov we could improve, as in our switch from howto.gov to digitalgov.gov, we had received some negative feedback about the structure of the new site.

And, we knew from that feedback that a portion of our audience preferred checklists and other tools, but we had also seen an increase in trade press mentions after we launched with blogs as a main content drive—further amplifying agencies' achievements.

Embarking on this research would help us learn much more about federal digital services providers, and in turn, provide them better offerings on DigitalGov.

## **Research method**

We decided to conduct phone interviews, as they would be easier to schedule than face-to-face meetings, and we weren't constrained by agencies' video capabilities (if we were to do video chatting).

Our main goal was to ensure our participants knew we weren't trying to link their statements back to their agency or specifically quote them by name for this project, so we reassured them at the beginnings of the calls. If they were able to speak candidly, we knew we'd uncover far better information.

We decided to make the calls 60 minutes long, as 30 minutes didn't seem enough time to explore interesting bits of information we may uncover during the calls. But, we also knew some interviews may be completed in less amount of time, and that was ok with us. We would judge the interview stopping point, as the time when the conversation stopped flowing effortlessly.

## **Lingering Questions**

After doing 20 interviews, we do feel like we have a better handle on who the federal digital service providers are and what they need to live up to their agencies' missions.

However, with 20 interviews, we have probably only scratched the surface in knowledge, as we know many government teams are siloed—sometimes, we found out, DigitalGov was the only connecting point between people at their own large agencies doing similar work.

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## Next steps

We plan to do additional research as we move forward with DigitalGov, making some significant changes to how it helps people in agencies deliver effective digital services.

Our focus is on government's digital product owners. We want to help make public services better by helping these people become more confident, capable and connected.

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## Appendix: Voices

*I've been at my agency nearly 10 years, but want to learn more.*

*I wear many hats and have no budget.*

*We are not as sophisticated as a similar agency, but are able to make technical advances when given clearance from agency leadership.*

*I want to make our customers happier and continually test our site.*

*I'm looking for areas I can demonstrate small wins.*

*I want more information on what we should be measuring, government-wide.*

*I'm looking for open source tools and new ways of working, as many people in my agency are bound to old rules.*

*I like feeling a part of the larger government community and staying connected.*

*I want to know how to raise visibility of my agency's work.*

*I like to have a dedicated site for government, that's not from a business, and can trust the information on it.*

*The agency mindset is to look to outsiders (like consultants) for advice.*

*I look up to other agencies doing similar work.*

*It makes my life so much easier to be able to point my colleagues to best practices.*

*There are always migrations happening.*

*We are in a consistent cycle of updating sites.*

*We're switching CMSs.*

*I have to work very hard to get approval for tools I need to do my job.*

*I kinda do a lot. Heard the term MacGyver?*

*I'm interested in learning new skills and seeking out opportunities.*

*I am interested in change/modernization of government.*

*I do whatever's needed in the moment.*

*I'm learning on the fly and interested in learning more.*

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## Team

We are a cross-functional team of writers, editors, strategists, technologists, and designers who all work in government and have a wealth of experience creating modern digital services.

DigitalGov Team

**Jeremy Zilar**, Director

**Jacqueline Snee**, Community Manager

**Dan Williams**, Designer

**Andrea Sigritz**, Editor, User Research & Content Strategy

**Toni Bonitto**, Editor, Platform & Content Production

**Janelle Thalls**, Video Editor, Training & Education

**Soncerray Bolling**, Video Editor, Training & Education

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We work with a wide range of experts and individuals who help make DigitalGov and its many programs the best in government.

USWDS Core team

**Dan Williams**

**Maya Benari**

**John Donmoyer**

### ***Communities of Practice Managers***

**Logan Powell & Bill Brantley**, Agile/Lean

**Amy Wilson**, Better Government

**David Kaufmann**, BusinessUSA

**Carolyn Fleming-Williams**, Community Solutions

**Kelly Olson, Tammy White, Eric Beidel**, Challenges & Prizes

**Jay Benforado, Sophia B. Liu and Ruthanna Gordon**, Crowdsourcing & Citizen Science

**Simchah Suveyke-Bogin & Annabel Berman**, Customer Experience

**Tim Cossairt**, Government Contact Center Council (G3C)

**Jacob Parcell**, MobileGov

**Laura Godfrey**, Multilingual Digital Group

**Philip Ashlock & Hyon Kim**, Open Data Community

**Katherine Spivey**, Plain Language and Information Network

**Justin Herman**, SocialGov, Artificial Intelligence, Virtual/Augmented Reality, Blockchain

**Bryce Spivey**, Video Production Pros

**Jean Fox & Silvia Salazar**, User Experience

**Alycia Piazza**, Web Content Managers

[See all communities »](#)

### **GSA Leadership**

- Rob Cook, FAS Deputy Commissioner and Director, Technology Transformation Services
- Rebecca Piazza, 18F Director
- Sarah Crane, Office of Products and Platforms Director
- Kelly Olson, Innovation Portfolio Director

# About DigitalGov

Welcome to DigitalGov.

We provide people with methods, practices, policies and tools needed to create effective digital services in government and tell their stories of how they are changing the way technology is delivered in the government.

Our job is to know the challenges people in government face, and support them wherever they may be blocked.

We've found that agencies need:

- Guidance on implementing digital policies and initiatives
- Open access to modern methods, practices, policies, and tools
- Focused trainings and events that help teams learn and adopt new concepts
- Easy access to collaborate with others across government who are working on the same problems

## What we are working on

Over the last decade, DigitalGov has become a destination in government to learn about the **methods, practices, policies** and **tools** that are needed to create effective digital services.

And we believe DigitalGov should set the example for how government **learns, builds, delivers** and **measures** digital services in the 21st century.

We are building DigitalGov into a destination that practices the methods that it teaches, and along the way, we are going to tell the story of how we get there, using the very tools that are available in the open, across the government.

We want to invite you to be part of the next stage of **DigitalGov**:

- DigitalGov on [GitHub](#)
- Follow us on Twitter [@Digital\\_Gov](#)
- Join our [Facebook page](#)
- Subscribe to our [email newsletter](#)
- Join a [Community of Practice](#)
- View our upcoming [trainings and events](#)

- Reach out, [send us an email](#)