



Emerging Technology and Process Innovation

Modernizing for the Future of Human Services

By Thomas Nisbet and Samantha Nie

We are living in a historic moment in which emerging technology, especially Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the proliferation of Generative AI (Gen AI), are providing new opportunities for governments to create innovative solutions and rethink the way we work. From automating operations, to leveraging data-driven insights and generating new and innovative solutions to complex problems, AI is now helping government agencies address staffing shortages, respond to disruptions, and modernize outdated processes to work smarter.

AI adoption is poised to expand dramatically in the public sector as the technology proves its value in a variety of use cases. Government agencies can revolutionize the way they engage with providers and clients, deliver person-centered services, and operate departments such as information technology (IT), finance, human resources, and procurement. Data insights from AI solutions can inform equitable, ethical decisions that drive meaningful impact resulting in reduced risk and improved outcomes.

Impact of AI for Human Services

In the human services industry today, agencies are focused on improving customer experience and services delivery to create measurable and sustainable outcomes, while simultaneously facing the challenges of a reduced workforce and an increasing pace of client needs. The capabilities of AI can transform how agencies drive improved outcomes for program beneficiaries, while also addressing the challenges of hiring, retention, and staff workload.

Now, as in the past, a logical strategy to deal with these challenges is to turn to technology. Technology has long been an enabler of automation and scalability, but with the recent advances in AI, its capabilities have moved well beyond that. AI is evolving as a technology change agent for driving improved business processes and outcomes. When paired with humans, what we call the human-AI tandem, AI facilitates accessible expertise that supports agency staff so they can work more effectively and deliver outcomes more efficiently.

Agencies leading the way in AI deployment are applying AI for improvements in areas such as back-office efficiencies, workforce productivity, cybersecurity, and user experience. Just as important, they are creating structures such as

governance committees and centers of excellence that spread successful use cases and best practices across agency departments and divisions.

This article discusses key factors related to planning for AI impact from the start of a project, and for creating a successful, long-term AI journey that delivers on the full promise of using AI to change the way agencies operate and achieving AI at scale.

Achieving Impact with AI Initiatives

Impact means thinking big, starting small, and never stopping.

Success with AI begins with a big idea or goal. With an epic vision guiding a long-term AI journey, AI's long-term impact can be equally as epic.

What do we mean by an epic guiding vision and AI journey? Let's start by what it is not. An AI journey is not a use case, pilot, proof-of-concept, or software point solution. These are examples of a "technology first" initiative, an initiative with a narrow vision and a defined, short-term finishing point from the start. These finite endeavors limit the scope and scale of an AI journey because they generally lack a broad business goal from the start.

AI initiatives should have impactful business goals with broad visions—such as creating the best customer service experience in government, promoting administrative staff to roles that deliver higher levels of contribution, or automating human-intensive processes across the enterprise.

While the ideas are big, agencies do not need to take on the full-scale, epic enterprise vision from the beginning. It is essential to remember that AI is complex and rapidly evolving and requires a gradual and incremental approach to adoption. Starting with a meaningful and impactful business case that is technically feasible allows you to gain hands-on experience, learn from your mistakes, and build a strong foundation for future growth. By starting small, you can also identify potential roadblocks and refine your approach before scaling up.

When starting small, it is also important to avoid stops and pauses in AI development as these become barriers to continued progress. The AI landscape

is constantly evolving and changing, so it is crucial to never stop learning and exploring. Staying ahead of the curve requires continuous innovation and iteration. AI development should be a continual and ongoing process.

Thinking big and thinking long term, from the beginning, while progressing incrementally and continually, is the way to achieve impactful results and successful business outcomes.

Impact is a business metric.

Business impact is a measurable objective that is meaningful to the business. When starting an AI initiative, it is most important to clearly define the business impact and objectives you intend to achieve. Human services agencies should ask, "What is important to our business, our agency, and our clients? What are our strategic priorities and associated pain points?" And then, "How do we use AI to help achieve those objectives?" rather than, "How do we replicate what another agency did using generative AI, whether or not it makes sense for our goals?"

An AI journey is business led and technology enabled. This means that the value of the AI initiative is determined by its business impact, and that impact needs to be measured from day one. In addition, to understand the full impact of the initiative, metrics should not only reflect the AI solution performance, but also its broader impact on program key performance indicators (KPIs).

Measuring business impact incrementally is also important. An AI initiative may start small with a phase 1, but to achieve long-term goals, agencies should know their objectives for phases 2, 3, 4, and beyond, from the outset, and measure impact at each phase.

Impact requires executive commitment and enterprise collaboration.

Finally, for any project to be successful, executive buy-in is a must. AI projects are no different. Success starts at the top with a strategic vision and with long-term executive commitment. Executive sponsorship is the glue that supports and invigorates collaboration across the enterprise and the strategic alignment of the business and IT, another essential element of a successful AI journey.



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Child Welfare Agency: Using AI for effective policy management.

A state child welfare agency is dedicated to protecting children and families. To achieve this mission, they rely on effective policy management, ensuring that policies are up-to-date, accessible, and easily understood by all stakeholders.


The agency used AI to transform policy management, making it a productive and efficient process. Working with IBM, they introduced an AI assistant that provided instantaneous access to relevant policy information, reducing the need for tedious and error-prone searches, and the risk of misinterpretation. Employees can also access policies at the moment they need them without extensive research or technical expertise, making policy management a productive and user-friendly experience.

The AI assistant is just the beginning of the potential impact of AI in paving the way for a more efficient, transparent, and effective Child Welfare service. The agency looks to leverage AI for more innovative applications in policy management and for other use cases in the future.

In Summary

AI is here. And human services agencies are ready to begin their AI journeys. They should start with big goals, epic visions, and ambitious aspirations from the beginning, but also remember that this is a journey: To create an AI-driven enterprise, early initiatives will reap value incrementally. The AI landscape is constantly changing, and maintaining continual momentum and progress is key.

Business impact is a measurable objective that should be tracked from the start. Executive commitment, continuity of support, and collaboration across the enterprise and over the lifespan of the project, especially between the business and IT, is essential.

With the human-AI tandem approach, government agencies are on the precipice of creating a mind shift in the way their organizations work. With big ideas, measurable objectives, strategic executive leadership, and alignment of business and IT teams, this AI journey will be a success. 

To drive a successful solution with meaningful organization and community impact, the business and IT must each take responsibility for appropriate aspects of the initiative and the related decisions—the business to lead and define objectives, and IT to design and implement a technology solution.

IT departments are the enablers, not the drivers. And just as it is not IT's responsibility to establish business objectives, it is not the business's responsibility to drive technology decisions or specific tool selections. Each party's role is critical and essential to building and steering the AI ship in the right direction. A partnership in which both parties are fully aligned on their respective roles and responsibilities is key.

An Outline for AI Initiative Success

Following are outlines of recent, successful AI initiatives IBM has completed.

State Health Agency: A long-term vision and commitment from the start paid off.

A state health agency had a vision of providing the best customer service in government. Through executive perspective and planning, the agency established a long-term strategy with

a roadmap, a sustained budget, and a plan to implement their vision. They developed a multiphase, multiyear roadmap to implement an AI-driven customer experience.

Working with IBM, the agency conducted Design Thinking sessions that established inclusive stakeholder engagement across the organization to refine the vision and define specific goals. The project provided multichannel and multilingual interactive, self-service capabilities for clients. These user-focused experiences automated millions of client interactions, significantly reducing the cost of unnecessary human interactions. Together with IBM, the agency delivered a modernized customer experience to improve customer service, staff efficiency, and agency KPIs.

Their approach committed to long-term success by continuously tracking measurable outcomes against their defined business goals to prove the ongoing value of the AI initiative from Day One. This approach was expanded across programs and is now positioned for long-term deployment across future programs. The agency, its programs, and most important, its clients, are positioned to continue reaping the benefits of this initiative into the future.