



COLLEAGUES AS CUSTOMERS

HOW MISSION-SUPPORT SERVICES CAN IMPROVE THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

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PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

Medallia

The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to revitalize the federal government by inspiring a new generation to serve and by transforming the way government works. The Partnership teams up with federal agencies and other stakeholders to make our government more effective and efficient. We pursue this goal by:

- Providing assistance to federal agencies to improve their management and operations, and to strengthen their leadership capacity.
- Conducting outreach to college campuses and job seekers to promote public service.
- Identifying and celebrating government's successes so they can be replicated across government.
- Advocating for needed legislative and regulatory reforms to strengthen the civil service.
- Generating research on, and effective responses to, the workforce challenges facing our federal government.
- Enhancing public understanding of the valuable work civil servants perform.

Medallia is the pioneer and market leader in Experience Management. Medallia's award-winning SaaS platform, the Medallia Experience Cloud, leads the market in the understanding and management of experience for customers, employees and citizens. Medallia captures experience signals created on daily journeys in person, digital and IoT interactions and applies proprietary AI technology to reveal personalized and predictive insights that can drive action with tremendous business results. Using Medallia Experience Cloud, customers can reduce churn, turn detractors into promoters and buyers, and create in-the-moment cross-sell and up-sell opportunities, providing clear and potent returns on investment.



INTRODUCTION

Mission-support service providers are critical to federal programs and personnel, typically supplying their expertise to help colleagues in their own agencies serve the public and achieve agency missions. Whether an organization strives to put a human on Mars, protect our natural resources or care for our veterans, none of it is possible without contracting, financial management, information technology, human resources and other support services.

To help agencies succeed, service providers should view the recipients of their services as core customers, and consider their experiences, needs and perspectives. Yet employees across the 24 CFO-Act agencies reported only modest satisfaction with the quality of support they received across the areas of human capital, financial management, contracting and information technology, according to the General Services Administration's 2018 Customer Satisfaction Survey. Their scores indicate significant room for improvement.

In this issue brief, the Partnership for Public Service and Medallia examine how mission-support service leaders can improve the customer experience at federal agencies. Through discussions with agency leaders at multiple levels, we identified three strategies for improvement:

- 1. Create a customer-focused mindset.**
- 2. Understand the customer perspective.**
- 3. Become a strategic partner.**



THE IMPORTANCE OF PROVIDING A GOOD CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

MISSION-SUPPORT service providers need to collaborate closely with their customers for all to succeed. Information technology professionals work with program offices to ensure their technology needs are met. Procurement staff help their colleagues buy products and services. Human resources, contract management and many other support staff experts also play vital roles.

Building and maintaining strong relationships with colleagues is important for delivering services effectively and offering a good customer experience contributes to that goal. The result is better value to organizations overall. “When support office staff deliver high-quality service, program managers can better deliver on their projects and the agency’s mission,” said Jason Bossie, director of the Small Business Administration’s Office of Program Performance, Analysis and Evaluation. “It’s a trickle-down effect.”

According to several of our interviews, this effect can even enable an agency to deliver a better experience for its external customers. Mission-support service providers can set the tone for customer service across an organization and provide a model that their colleagues can then use to deliver better services to citizens and businesses that interact with their agency.

Good relationships also help when service providers have to say “no” to customers, whether it is to reject a request to buy an expensive new IT system or turn down a procurement request that violates federal regulations. If they have good relationships with their customers,

they can credibly hold the hard conversations. Even if the outcome is not what customers wanted, the hope is they trust that the service provider considered colleagues’ needs. “They know if they’re getting no for an answer, we’re doing what is right and our service to the American public,” said Anahita Reilly, chief customer officer at the General Services Administration.

Delivering high-quality, cost-effective services may require support service leaders to push their agencies to take action or make changes. Their organizations may need to adapt to new regulatory requirements or propose different approaches for hiring, acquire new technology or perform other key business processes that will affect their customers. Having good customer relationships and holding conversations about those changes before they happen can help service providers manage those transitions. “When the [program] offices have a voice or input at the table they are definitely likely to support new policies or initiatives and not just because of a requirement,” said Ramona Bouling, a senior analyst in HR at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

To be effective, providers of mission-support services also need their customers to adhere to policies and processes, and productive relationships help. For example, IT service providers may find their customers are more likely to follow procedures such as resetting their passwords when they trust the procedures are necessary.

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Through our discussions with agency leaders, we identified three ways that mission-support service providers can improve the customer experience.



The first, highlighted through work at the Federal Aviation Administration, is to **change the mindset within mission-support organizations to focus on customers**, which includes valuing the feedback they offer.



The second, illustrated by the General Services Administration, **uses research to understand the customer perspective**.



The third, demonstrated by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, is for mission-support service providers to **become strategic partners with their customers**.



Create a customer-focused mindset

IMPROVING the customer experience often requires service providers to alter their view of their role and how they work with the teams and individuals they serve. Some mission-support service organizations operate with the idea that their primary goal is to keep the agency in compliance with the rules and processes governing service delivery. With compliance as the only goal, providers may not see that a good customer experience could help agencies better deliver on their mission. With a customer-centered mindset, providers seek to deliver value to their customers and organizations.

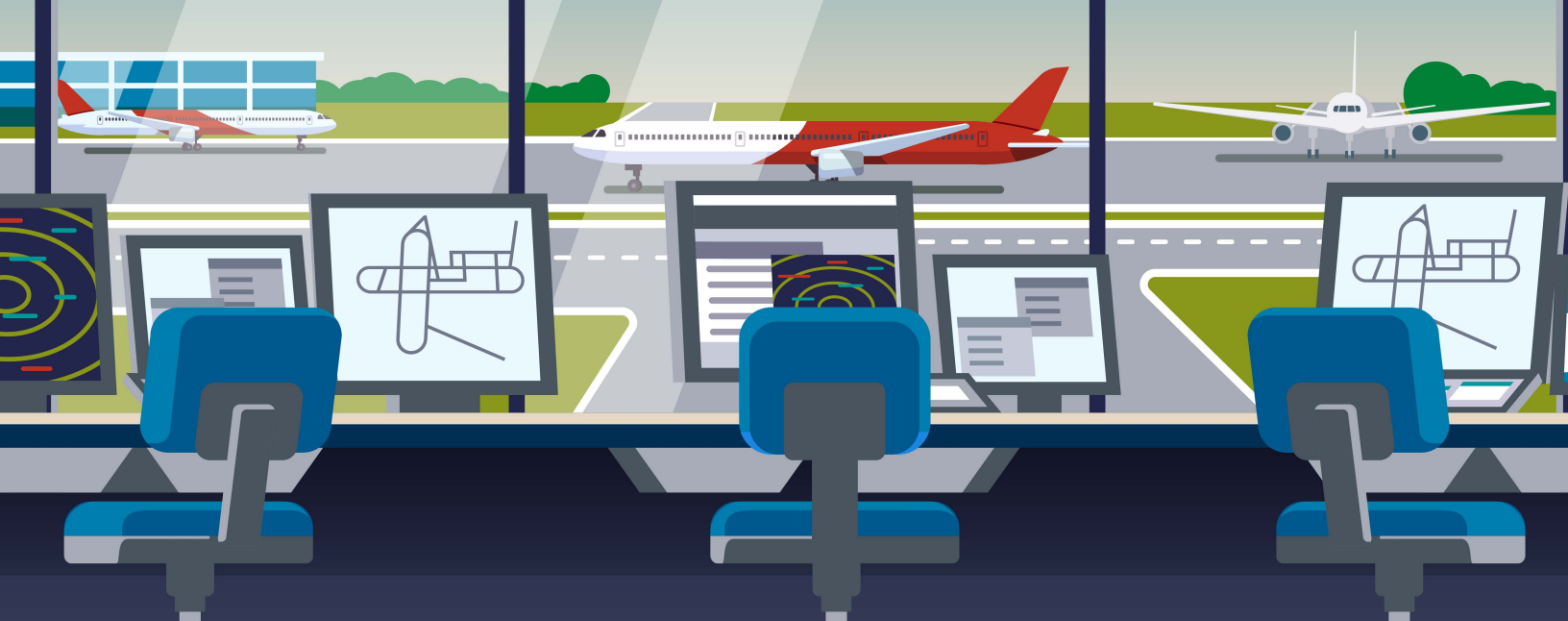
Shifting an organization's mindset can take time and effort, but can start with simple changes—for example, having service providers alter how they refer to the individuals and teams they serve. At the

Department of Commerce, that meant switching to calling people customers rather than employees, according to Connie Doyle, director of customer experience management for Enterprise Services, the shared services organization that delivers centralized IT, HR and acquisition services to Commerce bureaus and offices. “I would say to first acknowledge that your colleagues are really customers,” she said. “That was an education for many of our people. They referred to folks calling into the center as ‘employee.’ These folks are employees, but they are first and foremost customers.”

Fostering a customer-focused mindset also involves leaders defining what that means in practice. Doyle and her team created an “ethos handbook” that enshrined their approach. It lays out the mission,

vision and values of the Enterprise Services team and forms the foundation of its culture. One tenet in the handbook, for example, is to treat customers as providers would treat family members. “They’re not just a number. They are our customers. Think of it if it was your mother or father. How would you treat them?” Doyle asked.

Finally, a customer-focused mindset includes a willingness to listen to customer feedback, even when it is negative, and building tools or processes to collect it. With candid feedback on their performance, service providers are better positioned to improve the customer experience. The challenge is in creating a culture where feedback is valued which, according to our interviews, often requires attention and effort from mission-support service leadership.



Federal Aviation Administration

Creating a customer-focused mindset that values feedback

The Air Traffic Organization within the Federal Aviation Administration is responsible for keeping aircraft moving safely and efficiently through the nearly 30 million square miles of our nation's airspace. Management Services within the organization provides its offices with centralized services including HR, contracts and acquisition management, strategic business planning and policy oversight.

When Management Services was created seven years ago, it inherited broken relationships between support service providers and their customers. Quality was inconsistent among the different services and customer satisfaction was low. To address those and other challenges, the leadership of Management Services worked to change the mindset on collecting customer feedback. Their first step was to show a willingness to listen. Management Services team members set out to visit people in the offices they served, starting with vice presidents, hoping to solicit frank opinions from their customers.

Based on the initial conversations, team members realized quickly

that creating a culture that valued customer feedback was going to be a difficult but necessary component for transformation, said Claudia Bogard, director for customer strategy within Management Services. "As scary as it is, it is essential because you want to capture your worst moment ever and then talk about how you have grown from there. People said, 'no it's not a good time and we should wait,' and I said, 'no you shouldn't.' It's like if you were going to measure how many pushups you [can] do, you want to measure when you are at your weakest right?"

Using customer feedback, the Management Services team identified the most prominent issues and worked with each service provider to develop plans detailing what they were going to do to improve. On hiring, for example, the team learned that a misunderstanding between hiring managers, and HR and security staffs, was causing delays in the hiring process. An unintuitive form was leading hiring managers—the customers—to set unnecessarily high security clearance requirements for

new employees, which was leading to higher costs and increasing the time needed to bring on new employees. Armed with this information, Bogard and her team worked with the relevant service providers to simplify the form, and with hiring managers to clarify policies and improve the hiring process.

By creating a culture that values constructive customer feedback, Management Services improved how it delivers support services, although it still has room to improve, according to Bogard. The organization used a customer experience index to measure improvement and, in the first year after the team conducted interviews, held focus groups and developed plans on how to improve, the organization increased its index score to 59 out of 100 from 51. As the organization's efforts matured, its score continued to rise annually over the next six or so years, and it has remained in the high 60s across the 11 services it now oversees.



Understand the customer perspective

APPRECIATING the customer perspective is critical for improving services delivered to core mission offices and using more than one research method is usually necessary to determine what customers are thinking. Data from customer satisfaction surveys, for example, can illuminate how customers view the quality of the services they receive, but surveys often do not offer details on specific problems nor potential solutions. Uncovering customer experience issues, and determining options for addressing them, often

involves a multifaceted approach and can include conducting surveys, holding interviews and focus groups, and using administrative data, according to our discussions with agency leaders.

This approach has worked well at the Environmental Protection Agency, according to Dawn Banks, the agency's chief customer experience officer. The EPA's Office of Mission Support creates many opportunities to learn about customer experience issues. The office conducts a biennial survey, offers a customer experience mailbox

via email, through which customers can directly submit their feedback or concerns, and uses dashboards and reports to keep senior leadership aware of the customer perspective. "We're collecting data anywhere and everywhere that we can," Banks said.

The agency is also creating a "feedback loop" with customers by showing them how their input is being used, which begets more feedback. "What we've found is that people respect the transparency," Banks said.



General Services Administration

Using customer experience research to improve performance and coordination

The General Services Administration offers a wide range of services to other federal agencies, and state and local governments—from buying and selling government property to developing policies to maximize agencies’ operations. In 2015, the agency created a chief customer officer position and a team devoted to improving the experiences of external customers as well as those of internal customers who receive mission-support services.

GSA Chief Customer Officer Anahita Reilly and the support service providers we interviewed emphasized the need to collect customer feedback and data through multiple avenues to understand the experiences of their customers. In addition to conducting customersatisfaction surveys, the team analyzes operational data, conducts usability studies, and holds one-on-one interviews and focus groups to dig deeper into issues and get a more complete picture of the customer experience. “What we found, out of all of this, is that the surveys aren’t the answer to everything,” Reilly said.

The department’s service providers identified several areas on which to focus attention, for example security badging and onboarding

processes for new employees. Reilly explained that when the team first learned of complaints about the process, customers—in this case, new employees—said obtaining a security badge to enter GSA office space was taking too long. But when the team looked at the performance data of the security service, it appeared to be completing its work within the desired timeframes. Through discussions with customers and service providers, the team learned the issue was not necessarily with one provider but, rather, in the way separate functions worked together that was leading to gaps in the handoff between providers. It turned out the solution was surprisingly straightforward.

“We brought everyone together to talk about it, and they said, ‘I didn’t realize I needed to give this [form] to this person’ and it was a very simple fix,” Reilly said. “But it isn’t one that would have ever come up unless we were taking [everyone’s] perception into view.”

Ultimately, the emphasis on getting separate mission-support offices to work well together has enabled GSA to fix many aspects of the onboarding process, said David Shive, the agency’s chief information officer, including

making sure most new employees get a computer as soon as they start. “When employees get here, 99% have a laptop on day one, and that is an outcome of close collaboration between our Office of Mission Assurance, [which] handles the badging, HR [which] manages the actual onboarding, and IT [which] employs the actual infrastructure to make sure people are doing their jobs from day one,” Shive said. “We are all doing a really good job individually, but until we were all working seamlessly with that common goal, we weren’t getting the good outcomes that we’re getting now.”

By focusing on researching the customer experience from multiple perspectives, GSA’s mission-support service providers are better positioned to improve their performance and coordination. The effort seems to be paying dividends. In the 2018 benchmarking survey of the 24 CFO Act agencies, which assessed satisfaction levels in the function areas of human capital, financial management, contracting and information technology, GSA earned high customer satisfaction scores across the board and placed within the top five in the areas of IT and human capital.



Become a strategic partner

SOME mission-support service providers see their role strictly as completing specific transactions or processes, such as processing retirement paperwork for a departing employee. Forward-thinking leaders have realized, however, that service providers have the opportunity to be strategic partners to customers by, for example, anticipating spikes in retirements and planning for future human capital needs.

By evolving their role from simply completing transactions to proactively solving problems, service providers can be tremendous resources to their

customers and agencies. “We can do things for our partners that they hadn’t thought about asking for,” said GSA’s chief financial officer, Gerard Badorrek, who has been working with GSA offices to introduce new technologies that could free staff from repetitive, time-consuming tasks, such as robotic process automation—an emerging process involving artificial intelligence to handle high-volume repetitive tasks.

Similarly, the Drug Enforcement Administration’s acquisition function has moved beyond just processing procurement requests. The acquisition staff is now helping customers think

strategically about their needs. Positioning the office as a strategic partner has led to improvements, including the consolidation of contracts that cover multiple DEA regions, and proactively processing contract renewals earlier in the year rather than waiting until contract options are more limited due to the time needed to secure deals, according to Jeffrey Saylor, DEA’s deputy assistant administrator for the Office of Acquisition and Relocation Management Services.



National Aeronautics and Space Administration

Creating a strategic role for mission-support services

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration typically receives high marks from customers of its internal human resources services, and its leadership wanted to ensure continued customer satisfaction when, in 2018, it began a reorganization and transformation of HR services across the agency. Previously, each NASA center and facility provided its own HR staff and service providers. During the transformation, NASA's HR leadership consolidated a few functions and changed other roles and processes to position the function to be a strategic partner to the rest of the agency.

One part of this approach has involved establishing HR "business partners," an effort still in progress, said Jane Datta, NASA's deputy chief human capital officer. Under this model, the HR business partners, in addition to coordinating transactional HR services to customers, serve as consultants who help their customers make strategic human capital decisions.

"It's a very customer-focused effort," Datta said. "The difference between a traditional HR customer model and the HR business partner model is that business partners use in-depth knowledge of their customers' work and their needs, combined with data analysis and strategic thinking, to translate business needs into HR services."

The ongoing transition to a business partner approach has come with challenges, Datta said, including finding or preparing HR talent for these new roles. "This is a very hard skill set to find," she said. For now, the solution is to train existing staff members. "We don't expect it to be an immediate success because it takes a while to become a really great consultant and expand relationships with customers," she said.

The HR management office has also maintained customer satisfaction levels throughout the transformation by keeping its customers in mind. For example, the HR directors at each of NASA's field centers remain in place

as part of the senior center leadership teams. "They are essential for leading the changes in the HR function, and integrating HR services across their organizations," said Datta.

By positioning the HR function as a strategic partner to its customers, and prioritizing customers throughout the centralization process, NASA's HR function has maintained strong levels of satisfaction with its services. According to the 2018 GSA benchmarking survey, NASA staff reported the second highest levels of satisfaction with HR services out of the 24 agencies measured.



CONCLUSION

Mission-support services are an integral part of the federal government's operations and improving the customer experience for agency customers has to be an ongoing effort. Our research indicates that service providers who create a customer-focused mindset, understand customers' needs and serve as a strategic partner can improve relationships with their colleagues.

By building stronger relationships through an improved customer experience, mission-support service providers can make service delivery more effective, increase trust with their customers and enable their agencies to produce a better experience for external customers.

Maintaining these relationships, however, requires continuous focus and effort since customers' demands and expectations continue to change as technology advances and private sector services improve. To keep pace, agency leaders must continually refine and adapt their approaches to delivering services, keeping the customer experience at the center of their efforts.



Methodology

We conducted interviews with leaders from eight agencies who are focused on improving the customer experience for the core mission employees who rely on support services. We reviewed several different types of support services and interviewed leaders of these organizations. The agencies we contacted are at different stages in their quest to improve the customer experience.

To identify what has worked well, we interviewed leaders at agencies that reported high levels of customer satisfaction on the [2018 Customer Satisfaction Survey](#) on mission-support services conducted by the General Services Administration. We also spoke with leaders at agencies whose efforts are less mature about the challenges they face, and the practices they are using to improve.

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