



# BEHIND THE SCENES

HOW GOVERNMENT MISSION-SUPPORT SERVICES  
CAN USE A CUSTOMER LENS TO MEET BIG CHALLENGES

FEBRUARY 2021



PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

# Medallia

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# INTRODUCTION

**Mission-support services**—such as human resources, information technology, financial management, procurement and facilities—provide federal agencies with the tools they need to meet pressing challenges, from ensuring the safety of medicines to assisting those affected by natural disasters.

But for government to deliver results, mission-support offices must understand and meet the complex and constantly evolving needs of their customers—including federal employees, other federal agencies and external partners. When these offices deliver for their customers, the federal workforce receives the support it needs to fulfill agency missions more effectively.

This is especially true during times of crisis. Due to COVID-19, federal agencies have had to adapt to remote work and administer brand-new programs aimed at combating the pandemic. Agencies could not have met these challenges without critical assistance from mission-support offices. IT staff provided employees with equipment and digital tools to work remotely, procurement officials supplied workers with much-needed personal protective equipment, and financial management specialists helped agencies process and manage COVID-19 relief funds—to name just a few examples.

In this white paper, the Partnership for Public Service and Medallia examine how mission-support offices delivered services to federal employees and agencies

during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. We highlight two salient examples—the Transportation Security Administration’s Office of Enterprise Support and the Treasury Department’s Bureau of the Fiscal Service. Both organizations had embraced customer experience as a key element of their modernization efforts long before the pandemic, improving their capacity to adapt to changing customer needs once the crisis struck. Our research dissects these efforts, outlining five steps that mission-support leaders can take to develop more customer-focused services. This work builds off our 2019 report “[Colleagues as Customers](#),” which highlighted strategies for mission-support leaders launching customer experience improvements.

While our research highlights examples related to COVID-19, the mission-support strategies we examine are applicable beyond the pandemic. Indeed, data shows that federal employees continue to have mixed feelings about the mission-support services they receive. The General Services Administration’s Customer Satisfaction Survey, for example, measures how federal workers view their interactions with 96 mission-support offices across 24 agencies. While more than half of these offices increased their customer satisfaction scores in 2020, only one—the IT office at the National Science Foundation—received an average score above six on a seven-point scale, indicating strong levels of customer satisfaction.<sup>1</sup>

This paper will demonstrate how mission-support offices have created—and can create—more customer-focused services that better enable government to solve big challenges. Using research techniques such as human-centered design to understand customer perceptions, placing the customer at the center of key operational processes and decisions, and using real-time customer feedback to drive continual improvement can all make mission-support services—and the federal employees and agencies they empower—more successful.

## MISSION-SUPPORT EMPLOYEES MAKE UP AT LEAST 12% OF THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE



As of September 2020, there were 232,177 full-time, nonseasonal permanent federal employees in selected mission-support occupations in IT, HR, financial management and contracting. Source: Analysis of data from FedScope (fedscope.opm.gov) from the Office of Personnel Management.

<sup>1</sup> The GSA’s Customer Satisfaction Survey asks employees to state their level of satisfaction with “the quality of support and solutions” they received in four different mission-support areas during the last 12 months: human capital, financial management, contracting and IT. Responses range from 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 7 (“strongly agree”). Only the IT office at the National Science Foundation received an average rating of 6 (“agree”) or higher. All other offices scored a 5 (“somewhat agree”) or lower. See Performance.gov, “Customer Satisfaction Scores.” Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3cZdiKa>.

# HOW MISSION-SUPPORT OFFICES USED A CUSTOMER FOCUS TO HELP THEIR AGENCIES NAVIGATE THE PANDEMIC

During the pandemic, federal employees and agencies relied on mission-support services to adapt to new working conditions. Millions of federal employees quickly moved to teleworking—many for the first time—and needed the tools, technology and security to do their jobs remotely. Some agencies, such as the Department of Veterans Affairs and Small Business Administration, needed to quickly execute massive hiring surges to help handle pandemic-related duties, like providing critical health care or assessing loan applications. The mission-support offices that most successfully met these challenges built on previous efforts to develop a customer-focused mindset, design customer-focused services and incorporate customer feedback.

## Using a customer focus to improve collaboration between headquarters and the field: The Transportation Security Administration

**The Transportation Security Administration** has more than 63,000 employees who are responsible for security at approximately 440 federalized airports across the U.S.<sup>2</sup> Under normal circumstances, TSA agents interact with millions of travelers every day, verifying numerous travel documents and conducting security screenings.

However, when the coronavirus pandemic began, agents needed additional support, such as personal protective equipment and clear guidance on when to take sick leave, to continue doing their jobs while also protecting their own and the public's health. The TSA's Office of Enterprise Support, which oversees the agency's mission-support services, was better prepared to provide this assistance because it had experience soliciting feedback from agents in the field and shaping policies around customer concerns.

Before the pandemic hit, improving communication between the Office of Enterprise Support at headquarters and staff geographically dispersed in the field was a priority. "The disconnect between the field and headquarters was long-standing," said Kimberly Walton, executive assistant administrator for enterprise support at the TSA. Mission-support often developed pol-

icies without coordinating with the field, resulting in unworkable and impractical directives. "Headquarters would provide a policy directive or a standard operating procedure, and upon dissemination to the field, it would be altered at various locations," Walton said.

At other times, the office designed policies to maximize efficiency or reduce costs without a thorough analysis how agents in the field would be impacted. To reduce the agency's fleet of vehicles, for example, the facilities office within the Office of Enterprise Support instituted a policy that required field offices to retire all cars, vans and trucks with mileage under a certain number. This policy seemed to make sense for the facilities offices, but it hadn't considered that TSA agents needed these low-mileage vehicles to move between airport terminals.

To improve coordination and communication with the field, beginning in 2018, Walton and her team of mission-support leaders conducted visits to airports across the country. They met with airport leaders and staff and listened to their concerns. "They were saying, 'That policy might look good on paper, it may be very logical, but it's not operationally feasible in my environment, and if you had asked, I could have told you that it would not work,'" Walton said.

After talking with agents in the field, the team realized that "you can't do a methodology without involving the customer," Walton said. With this feedback in mind, the TSA's Office of Enterprise Support began involving customers in the design and implementation of policies. The office set up advisory groups to enable field employees to help design new policies and processes and offer feedback on whether they would be feasible in the field. These advisory groups provide input at every stage of the policy design process—from identifying issues that need

<sup>2</sup> Office of Personnel Management, "Employment - March 2020." Retrieved from [fedscope.opm.gov](https://www.fedscope.opm.gov/); Transportation Security Administration, "TSA by the Numbers." Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3qXWarV>.

improvement to commenting on draft policies. “I have my own advisory group, and everything gets pinged off them early,” Walton said, noting how integral the customer perspective has become. To further bridge the communication gap between headquarters and the field, mission-support offices also set up recurring conference calls and developed internal websites to exchange information and maintain open lines of communication with their customers.

While mission-support policies were developed at headquarters, some services, like answers to routine pay and benefits questions, were frequently handled by local mission-support staff. However, the Office of Enterprise Support realized that staff in the field sometimes lacked the expertise to address a wide range of issues. Because of this, staff were elevating concerns to headquarters rather than handling them independently. To address this issue, the office created communities of practice that enabled local mission-support staff to connect with and learn from their colleagues at headquarters. These communities equipped local mission-support staff with the skills to provide a broader range of services to customers. As a result, customers spent less time chasing down answers from the central office and could devote more energy to carrying out the agency’s mission.

These connections to customers in the field and efforts to address employee feedback helped the Office of Enterprise Support respond to changing customer needs during the coronavirus pandemic.

A prime example involved the distribution of work shifts. Decreased air travel caused by the pandemic complicated the process that TSA agents used to bid for the schedules they would like to work. New health protocols prevented agents from using their typical in-person process and a decrease in air traffic meant that staff had to select new work schedules. Health considerations and personal commitments at home—both brought on by the pandemic—further complicated matters.

To solve these challenges, the TSA’s IT office used its existing connections with agents to learn how the pandemic affected the typical shift bid process. Using this input, the office quickly launched an app that enabled agents to indicate their shift preferences remotely from their phones rather than gathering in-person. The IT office kept customers front and center while creating the app, conducting user testing to make sure the app met customer needs and putting together training materials to help agents use it. “That [existing] connection paid dividends, because it allowed the IT office to get valuable customer feedback during the design process,” Walton said. The app increased efficiency and met agents’ needs so well that the TSA plans to continue using it well beyond the pandemic, she noted.

Open communication between mission-support staff and their customers in the field also assisted the

agency as it procured personal protective equipment for its agents. Early in the pandemic, the TSA realized that agents would need masks and face shields to continue to work safely. Initially, the agency had difficulty distributing this equipment expediently, with some agents feeling they had insufficient protection against the coronavirus.<sup>3</sup> Despite logistical challenges, however, the procurement office within the Office of Enterprise Support worked to incorporate customer feedback as it acquired more equipment. To understand the customers’ perspectives, the office sought real-time input from agents on the ground. “They would find a product, and they would send it to an airport and say, ‘Pilot this,’” Walton said. Immediate feedback from customers helped the procurement office understand which types of personal protective equipment agents found most effective. The office then used this information to decide what kind of equipment it would purchase going forward.

TSA’s Office of Enterprise Support plans to continue fostering connections with field staff and incorporating their perspectives into the design and implementation of policies, creating more effective mission-support services that meet customer needs and enable TSA agents to achieve the agency’s mission.

## Using a customer focus to speed government’s pandemic response: The Bureau of the Fiscal Service

**The Bureau of the Fiscal Service** at the Treasury Department provides federal agencies and the public with a range of financial services, from auctioning public debt that finances government operations to collecting tax payments and disbursing Social Security benefits.

However, outdated technology and cumbersome decision-making processes previously prevented the bureau from meeting customer needs as efficiently as it could have. To address this, bureau leaders launched a customer-focused modernization effort in 2018, investing in new technologies and streamlining the bureau’s internal decision-making processes. These changes built on the Fiscal Service’s other work to transform the future of federal financial management and laid the groundwork for the bureau to provide federal agencies with crucial support services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

<sup>3</sup> Ian Duncan, “Investigation ordered into TSA response to coronavirus after whistleblower complaint,” Washington Post, June 18, 2020. Retrieved from <https://wapo.st/3a4NXeR>.

Bureau leadership initiated this modernization effort after recognizing certain changes in the landscape of federal financial management. For example, federal customers accustomed to making private sector financial transactions on their smartphones now expected the same levels of convenience and accessibility from federal financial services. In addition, federal agencies increasingly preferred to manage government payments electronically rather than use more traditional paper checks.

In response to these changes, the bureau invested in new technologies such as robotic process automation—a tool that can automate repetitive and routine tasks, such as entering information into forms or transferring data between systems. Informed by previous customer research, the bureau had invested in this tool as part of its effort to systematize routine financial processing tasks so that agencies could spend more time on mission-related work.

The investment in robotic process automation enabled the bureau to quickly provide agencies with access to funds for COVID-related services after Congress passed the \$2.3 trillion Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act. As the agency that oversees accounting for the federal government, the Fiscal Service was responsible for setting up 20 new funds—money laid aside for specific expenditures—to correspond with appropriations in the legislation.<sup>4</sup> This administrative process was a necessary first step before agencies could begin using the money for programs and services related to the pandemic. The automated system was able to complete all of the necessary steps more quickly than Fiscal Service staff would have been able to by hand, condensing the normally day-and-a-half-long process into four hours.

Before the pandemic, bureau leaders also instituted a new internal governance process that made it easier for Fiscal Service employees to get approval for operational changes that would benefit customers. This shift helped foster a customer-focused culture and enabled the bureau to better serve agencies as they responded to COVID-19.

In the past, employees had to navigate a long and complicated process to make operational changes at the bureau. Proposals had to clear several intermediate panels before reaching the governance board that could sign off on final decisions. New ideas often stalled between panels. “It could take nine months to a year to go through the governance process,” said Timothy Gribben, commissioner of the Bureau of the Fiscal Service. Slow approvals tempted employees to circumvent the formal process, resulting in some decisions being made without thorough consideration.

To address these delays, the bureau reduced layers of approval and established a straightforward two-step process. Major changes are now considered by two boards chaired by the agency’s chief financial officer and chief information officer, respectively. These boards examine the proposal’s feasibility and recommend any adjustments. To further streamline the process, the boards often review proposals in a combined meeting. Once a proposal passes this step, it comes to the decision-making committee made up of the bureau’s commissioner and deputy commissioners. “Proposals can now get through the entire governance process within a month or two,” Gribben said.

Importantly, proposals going through the new process have to demonstrate a clear concern for the customer experience. “The previous template to present a business case was sorely lacking,” Gribben said. “There wasn’t anything about the customer in there.” To address this issue, the bureau rolled out a new version of the proposal template that incorporates a section on “impact on customers” and requires the bureau to consider how a new policy will affect customers before making changes.

This streamlined governance process paid dividends during the COVID-19 pandemic. When the pandemic began, bureau leaders met with several agency customers, for example, to discuss how the bureau could continue to provide them with effective service as they transitioned to remote work. “We embarked on a multi-part series of virtual meetings to talk about the impact that COVID was having on their operations, and how that might change the expectations of the services that we provide for them,” Gribben said. With this feedback, the bureau updated its policies and procedures to better serve customers. For example, the bureau adjusted rules requiring agencies to deposit checks from the public within a certain period of time after receiving them, an unfeasible policy given the number of federal employees working from home.

These efforts are part of a larger philosophical shift at the bureau to incorporate the customer perspective into bureau services. “There’s been a change in mindset,” Gribben said. “Everyone understands that it’s worth it to spend a little more time to understand the needs of the customer.”

<sup>4</sup> Jory Heckman, “Bureau of the Fiscal Service sees investment in workforce pay off during pandemic,” Federal News Network, May 20, 2020. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3a5dCUD>.

# STEPS TO DELIVER A BETTER EXPERIENCE: A GUIDE FOR MISSION-SUPPORT LEADERS

Mission-support offices that understand and meet customer needs help federal employees work effectively and carry out their agency's mission. Without strong support, these employees have to hunt for the resources necessary to do their jobs, which can waste time that could otherwise be spent on more critical tasks. As the case studies above demonstrate, federal agencies that improve the internal customer experience are better positioned to achieve their missions and meet big challenges.

The guide below outlines five steps mission-support leaders can take to improve the customer experience with their services. These tips are designed to support leaders who have varying levels of experience and work across different mission-support disciplines.

## Understand customer needs and perceptions



- **Test your assumptions.** Many mission-support leaders have been customers of their own services. For example, most human resources professionals have gone through the hiring process. However, these leaders serve a diverse set of customers and should not rely solely on their own experiences or preconceptions when designing and delivering services. “Don’t make assumptions—you’ve got to engage the customers directly to understand their experience and find out what they care about,” said Melissa Starinsky, director of acquisition and grants management at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.
- **Use multiple research techniques to understand the customer experience.** To get to know their customers, mission-support leaders should embrace both score-based metrics and open-ended methods, such as an open text box on a survey, that allow customers to describe experiences in their own words. Surveys, town halls and one-on-one conversations can all offer different insights into what people are thinking and feeling. Analyzing data that shows how long it takes a customer to complete a process may tell only part of the story; actually observing customers go through the process can provide richer detail.
- **Identify how distinct customer segments experience services differently.** Multiple sets of customers may have different experiences with the same services. Customers at headquarters may differ from those in the field and certain program offices may have different needs than others. Mission-support offices should examine the experience of different customer segments to get a fuller picture of their work.
- **Communicate findings with visualization tools such as customer journey maps and customer personas.** After conducting customer research, leaders can bring their findings to life through customer personas—fictional profiles that describe customers’ behaviors, emotions, attributes, motivations and goals—and journey maps—detailed visualizations that show the steps customers go through, and what they are thinking and feeling during the process. These tools can highlight specific examples of the pain points customers face and help staff generate solutions.

## CASE STUDY

### Using multiple methods to understand the customer: The Environmental Protection Agency



The Environmental Protection Agency's customer experience team wanted to understand how employees felt about their experiences with the agency's IT services to help inform improvement efforts. To learn more, the team used a range of strategies, including analyzing IT help desk calls, conducting an agencywide survey on IT implementation, and holding a series of regional town halls where customers provided detailed feedback.

Cory Wagner, the EPA's acting chief customer experience officer, said the team's approach was to examine existing data and conduct additional outreach to fully understand how customers viewed these services. "Look at where you can get input from your customers, where you are currently getting it, where might there be gaps and how you can use all of that to get a big picture of what your customers are saying," Wagner said.

Importantly, Wagner's team also came to conversations with customers prepared to address likely feedback. Before town halls, for example, the team surveyed participants to get a sense of what issues might arise and invited IT experts to attend. These experts could provide real-time solutions to customer challenges without needing to research the answer and get back in touch.

These efforts helped the EPA develop a more thorough understanding of its customers. The 2020 GSA Customer Satisfaction Survey shows a modest 2% increase in customer satisfaction with IT services at the EPA, an uptick that Wagner and his team hope to build on.

## Create a customer experience vision and strategy



- **Define what a good experience looks like for your customers.** Using their customer research, mission-support leaders should move beyond platitudes (e.g., "deliver world-class customer service") and clearly define what a good experience entails for the federal employees they serve.
- **Tie internal customer experience to the overall mission.** Mission-support leaders should link their efforts to the agency's strategic priorities. For example, making a critical IT system more customer-friendly may help staff increase the speed and accuracy of benefit decisions. "A lot of times the number one success factor for employee enablement is whether they have the IT tools they need to do their job," said Amber Chaudhry, customer experience lead at the Small Business Administration.
- **Communicate the strategy across the organization.** Mission-support leaders should share their customer experience strategy widely across the organization, solicit feedback on their plan and explain its value to both the general workforce and mission-support staff. Publicizing the strategy also helps hold mission-support offices accountable for making progress on their stated goals.
- **Ensure there is a leader responsible for driving customer experience improvements.** While all mission-support employees should contribute to providing a good customer experience, a designated leader in charge of these efforts can help set goals, hold staff accountable and drive momentum. Some agencies have established a chief customer experience officer for mission-support services, while others integrate those responsibilities into the role of executives like the chief information officer or chief human capital officer.



## Build a customer-focused workforce and culture



- **Map the mission-support employee experience and understand how it affects the customer experience.** One of the best ways to strengthen the customer experience is to improve the mission-support employee experience. Some employees may be frustrated because they lack the systems or technology to serve customers effectively. Others may be experiencing burnout as they scramble to meet urgent customer needs. Understanding the employee experience by using the results of the Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey and other tools will help mission-support leaders address these issues and create a better customer experience.
- **Develop staff to see the big picture.** Mission-support staff may become enmeshed in the complexities of rule-laden government transactions, like complying with federal procurement laws or upholding merit-system principles while hiring. While understanding these rules is essential, staff may also need support from leadership to help them see the big picture and develop skills like creativity and strategic thinking that are critical to addressing evolving customer needs.
- **Recognize and celebrate examples of excellent service.** Celebrating staff who create a good customer experience makes customer-focused service a top priority and provides examples for other employees across the organization to emulate. Recognition could include creating an agency award or recognition program, nominating staff for an external award program, or prioritizing bonuses and other incentives for staff who get results for customers.

## Design customer-focused solutions



- **Understand and implement the basics of human-centered design.** Human-centered design is an approach for creating products and services based on people's needs, perspectives and experiences. A core component of this approach is learning what customers need using qualitative research methods such as interviews, firsthand observation and focus groups.
- **Involve stakeholders when creating or adjusting services.** Customer input during the design process helps guarantee that services meet customer needs upfront. Mission-support leaders should solicit feedback from a wide range of customers with multiple perspectives when creating or changing services to ensure that they will work as intended. Beyond the design of specific services, leaders should also provide customers with general opportunities to contribute ideas on how to solve challenges they notice. This type of feedback can generate valuable solutions that might otherwise go unheard.
- **Consider “impact on customers” when making policy decisions and new investments.** Mission-support offices often need to make new policies or investments to meet agency goals. Mission-support leaders should examine how new policies and investments impact the customer and require mission-support offices to use “impact on customer” criteria to evaluate new policy proposals.

## Measure and evaluate the customer experience to inform continual improvement



- **Make it easy for customers to provide feedback.** Mission-support leaders should make it easy and convenient for customers to provide feedback. For example, customers might be more likely to answer a few targeted questions immediately after engaging with a mission-support office than to take an extensive annual survey. A range of options, from email or text surveys to open-ended digital forms, can make it convenient for customers to provide feedback on their terms.
- **Respond directly to feedback and share feedback within the workplace.** Mission-support leaders should use customer feedback to adjust and improve their service. Leaders should share customer feedback—and their plans to address it—within both mission-support offices and the agency at large. This transparency will assure customers that mission-support leaders value their feedback and aim to continually improve the customer experience.
- **Make it easy for staff to analyze and act upon feedback.** When collecting feedback, mission-support leaders also need to quickly analyze and act upon the information they gather. To do so, they can invest in tools to help visualize data and identify themes or speed decision-making processes to ensure proposed improvements move quickly. Leaders should also communicate improvements back to customers, so they know they were heard.
- **Establish key performance measures based on customer feedback.** Mission-support offices often measure success by evaluating the speed of a transaction or service. But speed isn't always what is most important to customers—they may care more about a process being transparent and easy to navigate, even if it takes a little bit longer. Mission-support leaders should evaluate their services using the criteria that customers value the most.

### CASE STUDY

#### Providing easy feedback opportunities: Transactional surveys at the Federal Emergency Management Agency



The Federal Emergency Management Agency allows customers to interact with human resources professionals through the human capital office's HR help desk. To measure how customers experienced these transactions, Karen Filipponi, the chief component human capital officer at FEMA, asked her staff to create a five-question survey for customers to complete at the end of each interaction with the help desk. The survey enables customers to provide fresh and immediate feedback to the agency's HR specialists. "I am a big fan of transactional response. Tell us how we took care of you today. Don't just let me ask you once a year," Filipponi said. Filipponi and her team use data from this survey to analyze service patterns and identify specific areas where they can improve the customer experience.

# CONCLUSION

**Mission-support services are essential** to the ability of federal agencies and their employees to carry out a vast array of programs. During the coronavirus pandemic, mission-support staff helped the federal workforce maintain operations and adapt quickly to a challenging work environment. These services enabled agencies to launch several critical activities, from procuring personal protective equipment for frontline federal employees to managing funds for pandemic-related programs.

Going forward, a government-wide approach to integrating customer experience principles would help accelerate efforts to strengthen mission-support services and deliver consistent levels of quality across agencies. The Office of Management and Budget plays a crucial role in coordinating these government-wide efforts. For example, OMB issued guidance in 2018 to standardize customer feedback metrics for public-facing services across government. The agency should adapt and apply this guidance to internal government services as well. Expansion of this guidance would help set consistent quality standards and expectations for mission-support services across government.

As it develops a President's Management Agenda, the Biden administration should prioritize efforts to improve mission-support services for federal employees and work with senior leaders at each agency to drive this change. With focused efforts by agency and mission-support leaders across government toward this goal, mission-support offices will be able to better meet customer needs, enabling federal workers to meet big challenges, both now and in the future.



## Appendix I: Methodology

In this white paper, the Partnership for Public Service and Medallia highlight how federal mission-support offices responded to changing customer needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper also analyzes how customer-focused mission-support services impact agency operations and offers several recommendations for mission-support staff to create a strong customer experience. To examine these issues, we interviewed eight federal mission-support or customer experience leaders working in eight agencies or subcomponents between September and November 2020.

## Appendix II: Acknowledgements

The individuals listed below generously offered their input on how mission-support services worked to improve the internal customer experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. We greatly appreciate their time and counsel. The contents of this white paper do not necessarily reflect the views of those with whom we spoke, and the views of participating federal officials do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the federal government or its agencies.

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