

# Lessons Learned During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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In writing this, it is important to recognize that we are still experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic, so I write this with perspectives of what we have learned so far. These are early lessons that still remain critical to maintaining mission continuity and responding to the business, operational and personal situations created by the pandemic.

In the early days of pandemic response heightened direct communications and refining focus were critical. To most, these might sound like everyday priorities. What made this situation different was that we needed to take on an immediate, massive set of new technical work as part of the pandemic response actions. To react quickly and effectively, that meant we needed to create capacity by pausing or halting other things. Instead of leadership actions translating to more activities piled on the Agency teams, direct dialogues and laser focus were used to remove tasks and shift resources to priority tasks. Leaders had to eliminate the “traffic” of everyday activities and remove distractions not directly contributing to response.

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## New Challenges

For our federal technology leaders, this meant that we moved to frequent, person to person discussions about a very narrow, specific set of shared priorities. As I spoke with many leaders during these early months, it was evident that they had the majority of the capabilities needed to deliver mission continuity and pandemic response actions, but they could not tackle these new challenges without increased capacity. We created capacity through the elimination of activities not critical for mission continuity or pandemic response. These were not easy discussions. Many people across varied areas of government were resistant to “their project” or “their process” being paused. The heightened level of communication and unified focus was required to “declutter” agency workload so that there was capacity to address the demands created by the pandemic. The thought processes and decision frameworks used should be incorporated into future Agency plans for continuous operations.

**Suzette Kent** was appointed the Federal CIO in January of 2018. She joined government from industry where she has been a global leader in large-scale business transformation and has worked with many of the world’s most complex organizations. Her experiences cover a wide spectrum, which include technology development, product design, customer servicing, merger and acquisition, technology and risk policy and establishing new global industry capabilities.

Before taking the role of Federal CIO, Suzette spent over 29 years in the financial services industry where she served as a principal at EY, partner at Accenture, consulting president at Carreker Corporation, and Managing Director at JPMorgan. Ms. Kent has served as an enterprise leader for organizational learning, diversity and inclusiveness, and career development at every organization at which she has worked. She has been a frequent speaker in global industry forums, publisher of thought leadership pieces, and holds patents in banking processes.

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### **Redefining Services Delivery**

As the pandemic has continued it has become clear that we must redefine how government services are delivered. Continuity of human interactions through contactless options was already a part of the technology transformation plan of many Agencies, but now it went from a “nice to have” capability to “mission critical”. There were numerous elements of “digital” capabilities already being developed and deployed across federal agencies. Now these capabilities became a priority for all manners of maintaining continuity in our nation and around the world. Leaders were called on to accelerate things already in motion and to create new digital capabilities in hours, not months or years.

### **Contactless Options**

Government ability to facilitate interactions through contactless options spanned a large spectrum of missions. This included things like digital options for benefits application like unemployment and food supplements, medical attention via video, contactless payments, and electronic support services like on-boarding and retirement. Our personal interactions moved from the workplace to online call platforms and messaging. What underpinned these capabilities are trusted digital identity protocols, telecommunications access, and secure technologies. For governments (federal, state, local) and some industry areas, these foundational underpinnings still require

much more development so that all citizens have access.

### **People Power**

I often end my speeches with discussions about the workforce. In this article, I close with the most important point-people. The pandemic “lesson learned” is that we don’t yet have all the answers for creating an effective government workforce in a sustained remote or telework environment. Understanding the people experience and preparing the work at home professional must be a top priority for every leader.

There were many experiences during the pandemic that should inform and shape our path forward for technology and delivery of government services. It is my hope that by calling out these few examples, leaders will keep these areas on the list of top priorities. Applying these early lessons will help leaders continue to shape future priorities so that we can thrive through this pandemic and be better prepared for the challenges of the future. ■