

Niskanen Center

Companion to the VA Digital Transformation Case Study “Built for the Veteran”

BUILT TO DELIVER

A Product at Scale Playbook for Digital Modernization

“You do not have to start over. You have to start from where you are.”

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Start from where you are

Built to Deliver is a practical guide for leaders committed to improving their organizations' service delivery at scale. It is designed to help organizations adapt and apply lessons and *approaches from our research in the companion case study, [Built for the Veteran, How the Department of Veterans Affairs \(VA\) Built a Product Organization – and Rebuilt Institutional Trust](#) (January 1, 2015–January 1, 2025).*

VA is one of the largest, most complex service organizations in the federal government. It covers healthcare, benefits, claims, appeals, records management, memorial services, call centers, websites, mobile tools, and field offices, all serving the same population across their whole lives. Over the decade our research covered, VA achieved durable transformation at the full-agency level, sustained across three presidential administrations, multiple CIOs, a pandemic, and one of the largest benefits expansions in a generation. The actionable lessons from the case study have been turned into practical applications here for government leaders at every level and length of tenure to create change at any agency.

This is a blueprint for organizing teams around user needs, aligning business and technology ownership, making outcome-based investment decisions, and building delivery systems that endure change to build lasting institutional capacity and trust. Leaders are encouraged to tailor these principles to their own agency's unique structure, culture, and goals. The playbook is flexible by design, offering approaches that can be customized to fit different starting points, existing processes, and organizational challenges. We encourage you to:

Start from where you are

Each block includes key questions and indicators you can use to identify your starting points. The goal is not to use them as a grade for your organization, but an honest assessment to help it improve over time.

Use the building blocks to shape direction, not sequence

It's not necessary to complete one building block before moving to the next. Some of the blocks may be well established while others are new. The greatest value for your organization comes from understanding where you are and aligning your approach to address any gaps.

Take a harness-engineering approach

Harness engineering means attaching guardrails to shape movement, not walls to stop it. Use the 10 building blocks to help your organization build trust and capability without needing a perfect plan, a large-scale launch, or permission to start over.

Ultimately, the playbook is designed to help organizations select and adapt the ideas that will have the greatest impact in the context of their specific organization.

Our intent is to build on this body of work through a community of practice, with your help. If applying this playbook in your organization helps identify what's working and drives future successes, important conversations, questions, or new findings, our hope is that you will share them with us and your peers. The current home for this continued collaboration is <https://substack.com/@trusttheprocess2>. We hope you will join us to share and learn.

Understanding the product mindset

Product management is a trust mechanism. It gives an agency a repeatable way to connect mission intent to user need, user need to service design, service design to technology delivery, technology delivery to operations, and operations back to measurable outcomes. The product operating model is the way delivery teams work daily to deliver those outcomes. The loop is simple: define the outcome, build and operate services, measure the change, and improve.

Before an organization can implement a product operating model, leaders must change what they expect, reward, and reinforce. Product practices will not hold if leaders continue to fund work as temporary projects, measure success by activity, separate business ownership from technology delivery, or treat governance as a review process. The mindset shift starts when leaders organize around an outcome and use that outcome to guide decisions about services, teams, funding, data, governance, and improvement.

Prior to implementing a decade-long transformation, VA had to learn new skills and adopt new tools, but the deeper change was a shift in mindset. Leaders could not implement product at agency scale by treating it as a development practice alone. Product implementation starts with mindset change. VA leaders who made the most progress shared a few principles that helped cement the mindset needed for effectively implementing product at scale.

Trust is the organizing outcome

Public trust grows when people can rely on the institution to do what it promises. Leaders should name that promise in plain language. The promise should describe what users need to complete, what standard they should expect, and what experience the organization is trying to provide.

For an agency, this means evaluating major design decisions, governance changes, budget choices, and technology investments against one question: *Does this make the organization more trustworthy to the people it serves?* Name the trust promise your users are owed. That promise becomes your compass.

A service is a product

This shift in language implies a real operational change. Government tends to treat public services as projects: distinct work with end dates. But services do not end; they should be treated as products: work that has a clear owner, a roadmap, measures, operating support, and a continuous feedback loop. Products need teams that can keep improving delivery as laws, demand, user needs, technology, and operating conditions change. This is a significant shift in how government teams work.

In practice, this means identifying the two or three services your users depend on most. Ask who owns each service, who measures it, who funds improvement, and who has authority to change the service after launch. If no clear answer exists, that is where transformation begins.

‘It’s not that revolutionary. It’s just being super focused on delivering what your customer needs. A service is a product.’

FORMER VA LEADER, NAME WITHHELD FOR ANONYMIZATION

People, process, and technology move together

Product work requires people, process, technology, policy, and operations to work as one system, even as they exist and change on different timelines. A new law or policy can create demand that staffing, systems, training, and funding are not ready to absorb. A redesigned process can assume data, automation, or approvals that do not yet exist. A new technology can reach the field before the workflow, training, help desk, and operating model are ready to support it. A reorganization can move responsibilities without clarifying decision rights, funding, or accountability. When these gaps open, employees fill them with manual rework and redundant efforts, delaying progress and generating added cost.

On a practical level, this means asking whether the people and process dimensions are getting equal attention before every significant technology investment. If the answer is no, plan for adoption problems. Ask what else must change for the service to work in real life: staffing, training, workflow, policy, data, funding, field support, acquisition, security, communications, and technology.

Directional data is enough to act

You will rarely have certainty. Leaders need enough evidence to make a sound decision and enough humility to keep learning after the decision is made. Waiting for perfect data slows improvement. Acting with no data creates avoidable risk. You need enough signal to provide a meaningful guide to both management and the workforce, aligning the two to enable effective change.

‘The pursuit of perfect data often delays necessary action.’

FORMER VA CX LEADER. NAME WITHHELD FOR ANONYMIZATION.

Build a habit of acting on directional evidence. Make decisions reversible where possible and review results quickly rather than waiting for comprehensive evaluation before starting. Embrace [Objectives and Key Results](#) (OKRs) to collect useful signals, make a bounded decision, measure the result, and adjust.

Embrace the Red

Any operating model depends on honest visibility. In many organizations, red status triggers pressure to turn things green on paper. Problems are skirted, risks grow untended, and crisis is the predictable result. Instead, red status should tell leaders where help is needed, where a decision is blocked, or where the service is failing users. Progress comes from making it safe to surface problems early and setting the expectation that teams bring evidence with the problem.

It is important to be explicit for this norm to take hold. Leaders should reward early risk reporting, require evidence, and measure managers by how quickly they surface blockers that affect users or mission outcomes.

Implementation is where a law becomes real

A law, policy, executive order, or strategic plan becomes real through implementation. Implementation requires capacity: forecasting, hiring, training, funding, communications, dashboards, field execution, help desk readiness, data access, policy clarification, and issue escalation. Planning for these efforts is what turns a statute into a public service.

‘A lot of people think once you pass the legislation, that’s 90% of the work. And in reality, it’s like 5% to 10%.’

FORMER VA LEADER, NAME WITHHELD FOR ANONYMIZATION

Treat your own implementation planning as part of policy design. Before announcing a major initiative, identify the service owner, operating model, staffing plan, field burden, training needs, data requirements, dashboard, escalation path, and improvement cycle.

Career and appointed leaders need each other

Durable transformation requires both political authority and institutional memory. Appointed leaders can bring urgency, external perspective, and a mandate for change. Career leaders carry statutory knowledge, budget fluency, operational detail, and the relationships needed to make decisions survive leadership transitions. VA could not have sustained its decade-long transformation without both working in harmony.

Agencies must build transformation plans that career leaders can carry forward. Document decision rights, operating rules, funding logic, product ownership, and governance routines so progress does not depend on one appointed leader’s tenure.

The building blocks

From product mindset to organizational change

The transformation at VA did not unfold in a clean sequence; this will be the case for most organizations starting from where they are today. Yet when viewed as a whole, and retrospectively, a clear pattern of increased capability and institutional capacity emerged. We describe these capabilities as building blocks. Over time, the pieces matured into something larger than their individual parts: an agency-scale product operating model capable of meeting its commitments and promises to its constituents.

The building blocks represent the operational framework for executing a product mindset and model at scale. They show how any institution can build incrementally to achieve greater capacity to serve.

They show how to connect user needs to strategy, strategy to funding, funding to accountable teams, teams to feedback, and feedback to continuous improvement. With these connections, product mindset becomes a way for the organization to make better decisions and deliver more reliably.

Implementing the blocks changes behavior across all levels of the institution. Executives gain a clearer way to connect investments to mission outcomes. Program leaders gain a structure for defining user needs. Technology teams gain more durable ownership of products and services. Enabling functions such as budget, acquisition, security, policy, data, and operations become part of delivery rather than separate checkpoints.

The building blocks make transformation more visible and manageable. They help leaders identify which conditions are strong, which are missing, and where organizational habits hinder desired outcomes. They are not a recipe for copying VA; they show how any institution can build incrementally to improve organizational delivery.





BUILDING BLOCK 1

User-centered design

01

The initial set of building blocks enables organizations to reframe how they deliver services around the people they serve. If teams are to develop better products or services, then the organization first must understand the user's experience, cut down on fragmentation across different channels and systems, and make use of data to measure improvements. This is achieved through the building blocks by offering a structured method for handling user experience, common platforms to avoid duplication, and a data infrastructure to facilitate learning.

User-centered design shifts the organization's perspective. It requires the agency to understand what people need before it designs the service, replacing internal assumptions with direct evidence from users, frontline staff, field offices, and other stakeholders who use the service in real life. The teams then use that evidence to jointly shape the forms, workflows, training, outreach, policy, and technology.

Instead of asking users to navigate its structure, the agency begins by redesigning the structure in accordance with the user's task. Experienced teams examine the situations where people lose time, lose trust, must repeat steps, ask for help, or drop out of the process. Teams then use these findings to simplify the service and reduce the amount of work the user must do.

User-centered design provides an agency with a structured approach to listening, learning, and altering the service, and users notice this level of maturity in the form of clearer entry points, fewer unavoidable burdens, more relevant outreach, and services that match the way people actually seek help.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR TRUST

People trust systems that acknowledge their requests and accurately meet their needs. If a service asks for information that the agency already possesses, directs users to the wrong place, or gives instructions on what to do using language tailored to signals that only insiders would understand since the organization is arranged for its own benefit, then trust erodes. User-centered design counteracts that kind of signal.

QUESTIONS TO ANSWER

1. Who owns the user's experience across the user's full journey, including the parts that cross internal organizational lines?
2. When did we last watch a real user try to complete our most important service? What did we learn?
3. How does user feedback currently reach the people who can change content, workflow, or policy?

4. What are the top three reasons users contact us by phone or in person rather than completing a task online?

5. Are we measuring experience at the service level, or only at the aggregate department level? What gaps might aggregate scores be hiding?

6. What user feedback mechanisms do we have in place and what do they say about trusting us to get it right?

PRACTICAL INDICATORS

- We have done direct user research (interviews, observation, or task testing) with real users in the past six months.
- We have mapped at least one end-to-end user journey across organizational boundaries.
- We track service-level feedback by specific interaction, not just aggregate satisfaction scores.
- We have identified the top three points where users abandon or fail to complete key tasks.
- Feedback from users reaches the teams who can change content, workflow, or policy.
- Our forms and content have been tested with actual users, not just reviewed internally.
- We know what information we are asking users for that we already have elsewhere in our organization.
- We disaggregate experience data to identify gaps for underserved or less-engaged user populations.
- We have a shared definition of the user experience outcome we are trying to improve.



BUILDING BLOCK 2

02

Unified platform

Reduce the burden on users by reducing fragmentation in the back end

An integrated platform provides users with a consistent service experience and offers the organization a common foundation on which to base its operations. It eliminates the need for handoffs from one office to another, removes the use of duplicated tools and local workarounds by means of standard operating procedures, shared data, reusable services, and enterprise routing. Users no longer need to know about the agency's structure to access the services; the agency assumes this level of complexity and arranges the delivery around the user's objective.

A platform serves as a link between technology and accountability by providing teams with a shared area where they can receive tasks, pass on tasks, measure tasks, and improve tasks. It diminishes the effect of local variations and means that the quality of service is less determined by the particular office, program, or staff member a user happens to come across.

In this context, a unified platform provides the means to scale since it enables the organization to see the work being done, move the work around, learn from it, and improve it throughout the enterprise. VA's experience makes it clear that users perceive the value of a platform in terms of quicker service, fewer handoffs, more consistent decisions, and less reliance on local luck.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR TRUST

Fragmented platforms put the burden of navigating institutional complexity on users. Unification says, "we did that work so you don't have to."

QUESTIONS TO ANSWER

1. If a user wants to complete our three most important services, how many places would they have to go?
2. Who is accountable for the user experience across all our digital properties, not just one application?
3. What common capabilities are different teams building separately that should be built once and shared?
4. What would it take to allow users to sign in once and access everything they are entitled to?
5. Which of our legacy portals could be consolidated, and what is preventing that from happening?

PRACTICAL INDICATORS

- We know how many separate login or identity credentials our users need to access our services.
- We have a single, publicly available entry point for users to find and start key services.
- We have shared application programming interfaces (APIs) or data services that multiple product teams can use rather than build separately.
- Our cloud and hosting strategy is organized at the enterprise level, not application by application.
- We know which portals or systems are duplicating the same function for the same users.
- We have a named owner for the overall user digital experience, not just for individual applications.
- Decommissioning old portals – not just launching new ones – is part of our modernization plan.
- We treat platform capabilities (identity, APIs, cloud infrastructure) as shared services across the organization.
- We have a plan for migrating users from legacy portals to the unified platform.



BUILDING BLOCK 3

03

Data as product infrastructure

Use data to know the user, see where services are breaking, and turn evidence into action

Data as product infrastructure turns records, rules, evidence, and operational history into reusable capability. It helps an organization make decisions faster, reduce user burden, and improve services with facts rather than assumptions. The goal is a delivery system where teams can use trusted data to route work, validate eligibility, identify bottlenecks, and remove unnecessary steps from the user experience.

A unified platform gives users a coherent path through the service; data as product infrastructure gives that path memory, context, and decision-making power. Together, they let the organization use what it already knows to move work forward, reduce repeated requests, and make the platform feel less like a website and more like an integrated service.

Value is only generated by data when it has an impact on the way work is carried out. Instead of viewing data as a reporting layer that is placed above the operational level, mature organizations incorporate data directly into the service. This involves using the evidence that is already available before asking the user to resubmit it; simplifying complex rules into clear, repeatable decision rules; and providing the product teams with sufficient operational visibility so that they can continuously improve the service.

By providing data as part of its product infrastructure, an agency gains the ability to act upon what it already knows. Instead of remaining in static reports, the data is incorporated into the day-to-day processes of delivering services. Users notice this change in the form of making fewer repeated requests, receiving faster decisions, experiencing more consistent results, and needing to navigate the agency's internal complexity less on their own.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR TRUST

An organization that understands its users gains more trust than one that asks its users to repeat information or causes them to encounter a broken or complicated experience. Data infrastructure is how to build that memory on a large scale and fulfills its promise to offer users options tailored to their individual situations.

QUESTIONS TO ANSWER

1. How quickly does a user's signal (an abandoned form, a repeat call) reach the team that can fix the underlying problem?
2. When does data reveal a service failure? Do we have a mechanism to change the form, workflow, policy, content, or system, or does the signal stop at reporting?
3. Where are we asking users to prove facts that our organization already knows, can retrieve, or can

verify through a trusted source?

4. Which evidence requirements create the greatest burden for users and employees? Have we tested whether those requirements are necessary to make a correct decision?
5. Where do different parts of the organization define the same user, event, benefit, or outcome differently, and who has the authority to resolve those conflicts?
6. Is our data governance organized around the user's journey or around our internal office structure?
7. What would it take for our organization to stop making users carry information from one part of the institution to another?

PRACTICAL INDICATORS

- User feedback is collected at the service level and reaches the teams who own those services.
- We track behavioral signals (task abandonment, repeat contacts, transfer rates) as service quality indicators.
- We can identify service errors or failures from data, not just from user complaints.
- We disaggregate experience data to identify gaps for underserved populations.
- Our data-governance structure clarifies who owns definitions, access, and quality.
- Users do not have to provide information that we already have in another part of the organization and can update core profile information once and that update is available across services that need it.
- We have identified the most burdensome evidence requests in our services and tested whether each is necessary for us to make an informed and appropriate decision.
- Leadership uses operational data to identify problems, not to confirm everything is working.
- Data definitions are consistent across the organization and don't vary from office to office.
- Data definitions are organized around the user's journey as well as office, program, or system boundaries.
- Data governance defines who owns definitions, access, quality, lineage, and dispute resolution across the enterprise.
- Teams know which data source to trust when records conflict across systems or offices.
- We use APIs, shared services, or trusted data exchange to reuse evidence instead of rebuilding separate intake paths.
- We have mechanisms to act on data signals quickly, not just in annual planning cycles.

What progress looks like

When it reaches maturity, the agency runs a connected delivery system for the people it serves, and the leaders, product teams, and mission owners all have a shared understanding of user needs, service journeys, digital channels, and outcome ownership.

There is a clear chain of connection going from a user's needs to a funded item on the roadmap, from each item on the roadmap to a specific service improvement that has been released, and from that improvement to evidence showing that the user experience has become better. User research influences product rationalization and investment prioritization. Once the services have been launched, dedicated teams are responsible for them and continue to improve them over time.

Instead of relying on different assumptions, product teams base their work on the same body of evidence. Rather than setting up basic capabilities all over again for each program, they make use of common infrastructure, identity, data, design standards, and delivery practices. Executives assess progress in terms of service outcomes, user burden, adoption, reliability, and trust, not just in terms of milestones, system launches or spending plans.

The organization does not regard research, digital platforms, and product teams as separate modernization activities anymore; instead, it makes use of all three as the basis on which to deliver better services. A fully matured agency understands what users need, provides them with a clear digital route to the services in question, and sets up teams with the necessary accountability to continuously improve those services and maintain high trust.



BUILDING BLOCK 4

Governance with teeth

Make clear who has the decision-making power, what constitutes IT, and how authority is enforced

04

A large organization that is adopting a product mindset has to look after the internal basics that enable good ideas to be scaled. These include governance that makes decisions clear, a common language between the mission and technology teams, and an operational core that is strong enough to back delivery in different locations, programs, and functions. If these foundations are not in place, product work stays local, fragile, and relies on individual teams rather than developing into a dependable organizational capability.

Governance that has teeth enables an organization to enforce product decisions. It turns oversight into an operating system by having leaders establish the rights to make decisions, seeing the full portfolio before any money is spent, preventing duplicate investments, linking acquisitions to technical strategy, and keeping policy up to date as the mission requirements change.

It is impossible for product teams to provide coherent services when the lines of authority are unclear. Effectiveness requires leaders to apply rules in a consistent manner, set funding limits that correspond to delivery responsibilities, and stand up governance bodies that are actually able to make decisions. Strong governance does not involve adding processes just for the sake of doing so; it provides teams with a stable environment in which to operate, safeguards the enterprise's priorities, and stops local workarounds from causing fragmentation.

Governance with teeth makes accountability work in practice. It enables leaders to say yes, no, not yet, or not in this way and provides product teams with sufficient clarity so that they can plan, build, and improve the services without having to go through the same ownership disputes each time.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR TRUST

Reputable governance means that commitments become more reliable. Since stakeholders observe that decisions are consistently made and enforced, they comply and start to place their trust in the process instead of finding ways round it.

QUESTIONS TO ANSWER

1. Can our program offices buy and deploy technology without enterprise review? If so, what problems has that created? Think at your level, but also two to three levels higher.
2. Is our CIO authority based on current policy, or on informal agreements and memos from prior administrations?

3. When a governance decision is made, how often is it overridden through a side channel? What does that tell us?
4. Does our enterprise review process add value that program offices can see, or is it treated as a barrier to route around?
5. When new leaders arrive, can they find the governance rules in writing, or are those rules stored in people's heads?
6. How do we currently discover redundant technology purchases? Could we name two right now?

PRACTICAL INDICATORS

- There is a process for escalating and resolving disputes between program offices and the CIO.
- The governance process triggers a new workflow when senior leadership flags an issue and halts a deployment or process.
- The governance structure is regularly reviewed, certified, and supported by the most senior leaders in the organization.
- That authority is documented in policy, not just in informal agreements or legacy memos.
- Technology investments are reviewed for security, accessibility, and redundancy before procurement, not after.
- Governance decisions are tracked and visible to leadership in an accessible, API-based, dashboard.
- Program offices cannot easily circumvent enterprise technology standards.
- We have a process for escalating disputes between program offices and the technology office.
- Procurement data is visible at the enterprise level, so duplicate buying can be identified.
- Our governance structure has been reviewed and updated within the past year.



BUILDING BLOCK 5

Common language and cross-functional teaming

05

Build a shared map between what the mission needs and what technology can provide

By using everyday language and working together across functions, product work becomes a process of mutual problem-solving rather than a series of handoffs. Teams from the business, technology, policy, legal, security, data, operations, and field areas all work together starting from the same definition of the problem, the same desired outcome, and the same constraints. Each function provides its expertise at an early stage to help shape the solution.

Complex services require shared context before they require more process. Teams move faster when mission experts define the user problem, technologists shape the solution space, policy and legal teams clarify constraints, and operators explain how the service works in the field. Common language gives those groups a way to make decisions together without translating every issue through layers of intermediaries.

By using common language and working together across different functions, an agency can see the entire service rather than just the portion that corresponds to each office. Users notice this change in the form of fewer handoffs, quicker decisions, more clearly defined services, and solutions that match the way the work really takes place.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR TRUST

Common language forms the basis of accountable delivery, and an organization that is unable to explain its own technology to its leaders cannot make any credible commitments. Trust breaks down when commitments become unstable.

QUESTIONS TO ANSWER

1. When a business leader requests a new technology capability, can our IT team immediately connect that request to existing systems and dependencies?
2. Can we draw a map that shows which systems support which user-facing services? Have we tried?
3. What happens when a program office and an IT team disagree about requirements? Who resolves it, and how?
4. Which capabilities are funded, bought, or built in multiple program offices separately that should be built once and shared?
5. Could someone who starts a new senior role in the organization understand the full picture of what IT supports and why within their first 90 days?

6. Can senior leaders describe to external stakeholders what a major IT investment will produce for users?

7. Who in our organization can translate mission needs into technology implications, and technology constraints into operational consequences?

8. When a policy, workflow, or service change moves forward, can we map its effects on training, data, systems, contracts, security, field operations, and user experience?

9. Do major initiatives include experienced leaders from both mission and technology who understand enough of the other side to prevent narrow requirements or disconnected technical solutions?

PRACTICAL INDICATORS

- Business and technology leaders use the same terms to describe key capabilities and outcomes.
- We have a shared visual map that connects user-facing services to the underlying systems that support them.
- Investment decisions are discussed using both mission language (what does the user get?) and technical language (what must change in the system?).
- We can identify which systems support more than one business function and which are redundant.
- Business, IT, acquisition, and operations have regular structured planning conversations, not just escalations.
- Leaders can explain to oversight bodies how a technology investment connects to a user outcome.
- Capability needs across program offices are reviewed in one shared view to identify overlap and sequencing.
- New staff can quickly understand the relationship between what users need and what systems exist. Major initiatives include named business and technology translators who can explain dependencies, risks, and user impacts across functions.
- Planning artifacts connect policy, workflow, field operations, data, systems, security, contracts, and training in one shared view.
- The organization develops translation capacity through rotations, mixed-role experience, or leadership paths that expose staff to both mission delivery and technology implementation.



BUILDING BLOCK 6

06

The operational backbone

Create the unattractive infrastructure that ensures everything else functions reliably

An operational backbone enables digital transformation to carry out its daily functions. It transforms support, infrastructure, sourcing, staffing, service management, and field execution into reliable enterprise capabilities. Users perceive these capabilities as services which remain available, with staff who have the tools needed to carry out their duties, and issues which are handled through clear support channels rather than vanishing into local workarounds.

Trust in digital products is only gained when the operations involved can keep them running. An effective operating model provides teams with visibility over demand, inventory, incidents, staffing, contracts, and field conditions. With this kind of visibility, managers can reallocate resources, standardize support, and deal with problems covering the entire enterprise rather than addressing them at individual sites.

Standardized operations improve employees' ability to provide consistent service. When equipment, applications, network configurations, job expectations, and performance criteria are standardized, organizations can move their teams and support structures more quickly throughout the country to address demand. With standardized environments, support teams can be deployed swiftly and work efficiently without having to relearn each individual local setup.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR TRUST

Trust in digital products is only gained when the operations involved can keep them running. The operational backbone transforms IT from a local dependency into an enterprise capability and enables users to experience the benefits in the form of more reliable front-line operations, fewer avoidable delays, and a system that supports the people serving them on a national scale. Operational reliability forms the foundation on which all else is built.

QUESTIONS TO ANSWER

1. If a major demand surge or emergency required different operating conditions within two weeks, what would break first?
2. Is technology service quality for field or remote employees equivalent to what headquarters employees receive?
3. How long does it currently take to provision a new employee with working equipment and system access?
4. When did we last test our business continuity and remote work infrastructure under realistic conditions?

5. Do we have visibility into the endpoint and device health of our entire organization, or only parts of it?
-
6. Do our employees and front-line supervisors praise IT operational support or complain about what a horrible experience it is?
-

PRACTICAL INDICATORS

- Help desk and field support are measured by resolution time and user satisfaction, not just ticket volume.
- We have enterprise-level visibility into endpoint inventory, software, and device health across all locations.
- Supply chain and equipment provisioning can respond to rapid staffing changes within defined timeframes.
- Network and remote-access capacity has been stress-tested against realistic demand scenarios.
- Service desk performance is consistent across large and small locations, not just at headquarters.
- Field employees in different locations receive equivalent technology support regardless of local leadership.
- We have a tested business continuity and remote work plan exercised within the past year.
- Operations staffing levels are matched to the current size and complexity of the technology environment.
- Cloud and hosting infrastructure is reviewed regularly for capacity, cost, and resilience.

What progress looks like

When an organization reaches maturity, it manages delivery by means of shared facts, enforceable decisions, and cross-functional execution. Product teams begin the planning process with reliable evidence, clearly defined decision rights, and the appropriate disciplines present from the very beginning.

Data provides teams with a shared picture of the situation. Leaders use this picture to understand demand, plan their investments, identify potential risks, and assess whether services have improved. Similarly, product teams use the same evidence when making tradeoffs, adjusting their roadmaps, and reducing friction for users.

The organization becomes disciplined through good governance. Leaders should decide once and then apply it consistently, at the same time stopping any side channels from undermining the enterprise's priorities. Members of the team should know who has the authority to approve work, who has the authority to halt work, who is responsible for the outcome, and what standards govern the delivery.

The organization achieves both speed and accuracy through cross-functional teaming. Before problems become delays, leaders work together to solve them. The teams identify constraints early on, quickly resolve conflicts, and ensure that there is a common understanding when carrying out the tasks. At maturity, the organization has leaders who can translate across mission and technology without slowing the work down. They see how a change in policy, workflow, or system design affects field operations, data flows, contracts, security, training, and user experience. They make those connections visible early enough for teams to adjust plans before problems become delays, rework, or failed adoption.

A well-developed organization shows progress through fewer duplicative investments, faster decisions, clearer ownership, stronger portfolio discipline, less rework, and fewer implementation surprises. Teams move with confidence because the organization gives them the evidence, authority, shared language, and translation capacity to improve services at scale.



BUILDING BLOCK 7

Product operating model

Own services over time, don't just deliver projects on a schedule

07

While early successes are important, they are not enough; organizations must have in place the necessary structures to maintain ownership, funding, knowledge, and accountability following the end of pilots, the departure of leaders, or changes in circumstances. The fundamental elements described in this section explain how to drive lasting product-driven change by organizing around products and capabilities, linking funding to ongoing responsibilities, and ensuring that institutional knowledge is retained so that progress can be made over time.

Product thinking on a large scale brings the various systems involved in technology delivery — such as policy, funding, governance, acquisition, security, data, operations, the workforce, and mission support — into alignment. This alignment enables the organization to modernize at the same speed as technology.

The same level of discipline is applied to the delivery teams and services. Each priority service is given a permanent owner, a cross-functional team, a roadmap, a feedback loop, a funding pathway, and outcome indicators. Responsibility, authority, resources, and accountability are all brought together to ensure service quality and achieve continuous improvement.

The model affects the way in which teams plan and carry out their work. The teams treat the service as a dynamic capability and look at user feedback, operational data, changes to policy, technical limitations, and the experience gained on the front lines. Using this evidence, they establish priorities, make decisions involving tradeoffs, release improvements, and assess whether the service is working better for the people who use it.

Leaders use the model to finance long-term capabilities, define who has the right to make decisions, examine progress in relation to the desired outcomes, and eliminate any obstacles that hinder delivery. They assess success in terms of service quality, reliability, level of adoption, the burden placed on users, and tangible improvements over time.

Modernization becomes scalable because of product thinking on an agency scale. The product operating model ensures that service improvements are sustainable. It assigns each important service a responsible owner, a team, a routine, and a disciplined approach to continuous improvement involving the users.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR TRUST

Services that are launched and then neglected give the impression that they are unimportant and therefore so is the need that led to the service. It is one more version of a broken promise. Product ownership ensures that the responsibility for improving the service stays long after launch and that trust is built through ongoing care and sustained improvements.

QUESTIONS TO ANSWER

1. For each of our major services: Who is accountable for whether it works well for users six months after launch?

2. How do our product teams receive and act on user feedback?

3. How do we handle it when a law changes, a policy updates, or user needs shift and the system is not set up to respond?

4. Are we managing our application portfolio strategically, or are we still treating every system as a separate island?

5. Are our product managers encouraged and empowered to think strategically about the future experience of their users?

6. Do our product teams have a clear understanding of what the desired outcomes are for their products?

PRACTICAL INDICATORS

- Each major service has a named product owner with authority to make decisions about it over time.
- Product owners have access to user data, feedback, and usage metrics on a regular basis.
- Teams work in iterative cycles with defined backlogs, not one-time project plans.
- There is a clear process for a product team to respond to user feedback without starting a new contract or funding cycle.
- Product performance is measured by user outcomes, not just system uptime or delivery milestones.
- Product managers have skills in user research, prioritization, and outcome measurement, not just project coordination.
- We have a reuse-first decision hierarchy that discourages building custom solutions when capabilities already exist.
- We have a product roadmap visible to leadership that extends at least 12 months.
- Capability rationalization (consolidating duplicative systems) is part of our product strategy.



BUILDING BLOCK 8

08

Capability-based budgeting

Arrange your funds around the services that you provide, not just the systems that you finance

Capability-based budgeting arranges funding based on the capabilities an organization needs to effectively deliver its services. It gives leaders a complete understanding of the requirements for operating, securing, modernizing and improving a service over time.

The process begins with a single fundamental question: *which capability must the organization maintain if it is to deliver the outcome reliably?* This question brings together representatives from finance, mission, technology, and operations so that product owners can gain a better understanding of the cost, risk, and trade-offs associated with the services they are responsible for.

The model alters budgetary behavior by having leaders plan the funding of capabilities that are intended to continue over time, rather than viewing modernization as a series of separate projects. Product owners can take account of the entire cost of service quality, covering sustainment, security, data, infrastructure and future improvements. Executives can compare investments in terms of the mission capability they enhance and the user outcome they support.

Capability-based budgeting gives modernization a financial operating model. It aligns money with service ownership, makes the real cost of delivery visible, and gives leaders a stronger basis for funding the capabilities users depend on over time.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR TRUST

It is impossible for organizations to keep their promises if they do not have the funding to do so. If the actual cost of services is concealed by budget arrangements, then decisions regarding investment, trade-offs, and modernization are based on inaccurate information. Capability-based budgeting ensures that the cost of meeting commitments becomes visible and manageable.

QUESTIONS TO ANSWER

1. If a program office asked, “What does it cost to deliver this service well?” could our budget office answer that today?
2. Which legacy systems are consuming operations and maintenance resources that could be redirected if the legacy system were retired?
3. Are our budget lines organized around the systems we built five years ago, or the services we are trying to deliver today?

4. Who has visibility into the full cost of each major service capability, including cloud, licensing, security, and operations?
5. When modernization advances, is decommissioning of replaced systems funded and planned, or deferred indefinitely?

PRACTICAL INDICATORS

- We can identify the total cost of delivering each major user-facing service, including sustainment and operations.
- Budget lines are organized around service capabilities, not just individual systems or project codes.
- Operations and maintenance costs are treated as baseline requirements, not discretionary items to be cut.
- Product owners have budget visibility and can see what resources support the service they own.
- We have a plan for retiring legacy systems when modernization advances, with decommissioning funded and planned.
- Business and technology teams jointly validate the mapping between budget lines and service outcomes.
- Congressional oversight reporting connects funding to user-facing outcomes.
- Acquisition and product leadership are in the same planning conversations, not working from separate tracks.
- We conduct an annual review of the total cost of service delivery across major programs.



BUILDING BLOCK 9

Durable strategy and institutional knowledge

Make progress that can survive leadership change

A capable strategy combined with institutional knowledge enables an agency to keep making progress even when there are changes in leadership, shifts in priorities, pressure on the budget, and evolving external demands. The aim is to preserve the knowledge, procedures, and decisions that enable the team to continue working.

Leaders must have a strategy that people can understand, a method of delivery that teams can carry out repeatedly, and planning procedures that maintain context during changes. The agency should record the reasons for major decisions, the way work passes through the organization, who is responsible for the key capabilities, and which practices lead to better service outcomes.

Continuity between strategy and its implementation using shared roadmaps, operating playbooks, decision records, performance reviews, and transition materials allows teams to keep their work aligned over time. When new leaders take over, they receive usable knowledge, current priorities, open risks, and proven delivery practices. Meanwhile, members of the staff can better understand how to maintain momentum as they adapt to new directions.

Maturity comes when the organization stops restarting its transformation with each new leader and instead passes on a well-defined direction, ingrained operating model, and applies the documented lessons to improve the next delivery cycle. A durable strategy and institutional knowledge allow for smooth handoffs and give the next team a head start.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR TRUST

Leadership transition should not amount to a service disruption; progress should continue after the leader has left because the operating model is more durable than any single leader.

QUESTIONS TO ANSWER

1. If our top three transformation leaders left tomorrow, what would continue and what would stop?
2. Which transformation priorities are embedded in policy or formal process, and which exist only because of specific individuals?
3. How does our organization brief incoming leaders on the operating model? Is that enough?
4. Where is transformation progress documented in a way that the next team could find and use?
5. What would we put on our unfinished agenda if we left tomorrow? Is that documented anywhere?

6. Which of our current governance and budget routines would survive a significant leadership change without anyone explicitly deciding to continue them?

PRACTICAL INDICATORS
→ Core transformation priorities are documented in policy or formal guidance, not just in leadership memos.
→ Budget and governance routines operate on a regular cycle that does not depend on any one leader to convene.
→ We have a documented transition plans so that future leaders understand current priorities, status, and rationale.
→ Performance dashboards are visible to all relevant stakeholders, not just the leader who commissioned them.
→ Product teams and practices have documented methods, playbooks, and runbooks, not just tacit knowledge.
→ Career staff have been developed to carry transformation work through transitions.
→ We have a process for briefing incoming leadership on the operating model and the rationale for its design.
→ We track unfinished agendas explicitly, so the next leader knows what still needs to be built.

What progress looks like

When the organization reaches maturity, it treats its priority services as ongoing capabilities, and leaders designate a specific owner for each important service, approve a funded roadmap, form a cross-functional team, and establish outcome measures to show that the service has improved over time.

Product teams plan and carry out their work using a steady operating rhythm. They handle backlogs, make trade-offs, respond to evidence from users and operations, and regularly release improvements. Service owners have sufficient resources and decision-making authority to maintain quality, reliability, and continuous improvement.

The budget leaders provide funding for the entire capability associated with each service. They link the costs of modernization, sustainment, security, infrastructure, data, operations, and decommissioning to the outcomes that the organization has to deliver. Because they can see the actual cost of service quality, executives are able to make

investment decisions taking into account the full lifecycle.

The organization ensures that its strategy is sustained during changes in leadership. Teams keep up to date with roadmaps, records of decisions, operating playbooks, performance reviews, and the materials needed for transitions to retain the relevant context. When new leaders take over, they receive the current priorities, the open risks, the proven practices, and a clear understanding of what the organization should continue with, what it should improve, and what it should stop.

A well-established organization demonstrates progress through clear ownership, transparent costing, a stable strategy, and services that continue to improve after launch. Modernization no longer relies on one-off initiatives or the heroics of individual champions. The agency has developed the kind of management system needed to maintain a higher level of service delivery over time.



BUILDING BLOCK 10

Customer experience as an operational driver

Keep the user in the room when decisions are made.

10

Customer experience should be used as a management tool rather than being treated as a standalone measurement exercise. If an organization is adopting a product mindset it needs a method of turning user insights into operational actions. Once customer experience is linked to decision-making, teams will be able to detect where services are failing, prioritize the correct remedies, and keep on improving the conditions that affect what users actually experience.

Customer experience takes on an operational role when an organization bases its decisions on user evidence to determine what to build, what to repair, what to fund, and what to stop carrying forward. It transfers user insight into the management system that guides product roadmaps, process improvements, service recovery, and investment decisions.

The main takeaway is that customer experience has to influence decisions. When managers link satisfaction figures, surveys, interviews, complaints, call patterns, and service data to ownership, funding, and delivery priorities, these elements generate value. The customer experience function should assist teams in identifying the places where users lose time, the points at which trust is lost, and the areas in which the organization imposes unnecessary burdens.

This building block enables leaders to ask better questions by focusing on what users still need that the organization is not doing, which service gaps cause the most friction or distrust, and which improvements would reduce the burden for the greatest number of users. Asking these questions takes customer experience from simply reporting to execution.

A well-developed organization incorporates customer experience evidence when carrying out portfolio reviews, planning roadmaps, making budget decisions, and discussing performance. The product teams can explain the particular user problems that their work is intended to solve and the way in which it improves the experience over time. Executives can identify the areas where user needs are still not being met and thus focus on the services that have the greatest impact on trust, access, and outcomes.

Taking customer experience into account as an operational factor ensures that the organization continues to learn from it. It gives the user a permanent place in the decision-making process and makes service quality a responsibility of management, not just a communication issue.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR TRUST

It is not merely a question of speed since trust also involves accuracy, transparency, and the sense that users are experiencing the organization as acting in their interests, even if it does make errors. If customer experience is not incorporated into the way operations are run, teams will efficiently focus on the wrong things. Only when customer experience is built into the process are investment choices linked to the users who are supposed to benefit from those investments.

QUESTIONS TO ANSWER

1. When did our organization last produce a synthesis of what users still need that no current system or initiative is addressing?

2. Does our CX function influence where investment goes, or does it document what happened after investment decisions were made?

3. Can we show that our speed or throughput gains have also improved accuracy, transparency, or the user's experience of the outcome, not just the volume of outputs?

4. Which user signals (repeat contacts, appeal or dispute rates, form abandonment) are we tracking as process quality indicators, not just service desk metrics?

PRACTICAL INDICATORS

- Our CX function has a direct line to executive leadership and is involved in investment decisions, not just reporting.
- We conduct structured syntheses of cumulative user feedback, not just project-specific research, to identify persistent unmet needs.
- We can name users' top three unmet needs our that no current product or initiative has fully closed.
- User feedback informs the prioritization of our product backlog and investment roadmap, not just design sprints.
- We track accuracy and outcome quality, not just speed and volume, as measures of service delivery.
- Operational metrics are built into modernization releases, not appended as satisfaction surveys after delivery.
- We disaggregate experience and outcome data to identify gaps for underserved or less-engaged user populations.
- Before deploying automation or AI tools, we verify that what we are automating is the actual bottleneck users experience.

FOR BUILDING BLOCK 10

What progress looks like

When the organization reaches maturity, it uses evidence from customer experience to guide decisions at all levels of service delivery. Together with cost, risk, and delivery performance, senior managers examine user needs, service gaps, trust signals, and burden measures.

Product teams can explain the user problems that they are responsible for, the evidence that underpins those priorities, and the way in which recent changes have improved the service. Through clear findings that teams can act on, CX teams are involved in setting roadmaps, conducting portfolio reviews, carrying out service recovery, and making investment decisions.

Managers use customer experience data to focus attention and resources on the services that have the greatest impact on access, trust, and outcomes. They consider which user needs are still not met, which barriers cause the most difficulty, and which improvements should be given priority.

The organization focuses user experience to understand what people need, check whether services have improved, and determine what work should be carried out next.

Getting started

Your first 90 days

No organization starts a transformation from scratch. Some capabilities are strong and some require shoring up. The aim during the first 90 days is not to deal with every aspect of every building block, but to identify your starting points, establish an honest baseline, and start moving in a direction that makes use of what you already have in place.

01

Step 1: Do an honest assessment (Days 1–30)

For each of the key questions and practical indicators across the 10 building blocks, get the right people in the room to go through them. Include technology leaders, business or program leaders, field staff, and at least a few representatives of the users you serve. The aim should be an accurate view, not a positive one. It can be helpful to invite a neutral external party to assist your team in developing a complete and honest overview of the organization's current situation. They can help you identify the items where you are uncertain about the answer. The uncertainty is useful information and shows you where there are gaps in your organizational visibility.

02

Step 2: Find your highest-leverage gap (Days 15–45)

After the assessment, look for the building block in which a modest investment would unlock progress on several others. Avoid the temptation to start with the easiest thing first and focus on the most impactful. Common high-leverage starting points:

- If your users are constantly upset by the user experience no matter what new products you launch, start with Building Block 1. Strengthen the feedback loop between your users and your teams.
- If you do not have a shared language between business and IT, start with Building Block 5. Almost everything else is harder without it.
- If your governance decisions are routinely overridden informally, start with Building Block 4. The other blocks require enforceable rules to function.
- If you have good services but no one owns them after launch, start with Building Block 7. Product ownership changes the trajectory of everything downstream.
- If your operations are inconsistent across locations, start with Building Block 6. Users experience the floor of reliability, not the ceiling of innovation.
- If your budget structure makes it impossible to see the full cost of a service, start with Building Block 8. Invisible costs make credible commitments impossible.

03

Step 3: Name the trust promise (Days 1–90)

Every transformation needs a clear organizing principle. For VA, it was rebuilding trust with veterans. What is yours? The trust promise should be specific enough to evaluate decisions against it. “Better digital services” is not a trust promise. “Veterans should be able to check their claim status, update their information, and file a new claim without calling us” is a trust promise. The promise becomes the filter: when two competing priorities reach leadership, the question is which choice moves you closer to keeping it.

04

Step 4: Build the relay race mindset from day one (ongoing)

Transformation outlasts any individual leader. From the beginning, document your decisions, rationale, and progress in ways the next team can find and use. Build governance and routines that run on their own schedule, not yours. Develop career staff who can carry the work forward. Identify what is on your unfinished agenda now, before you leave, so the next leader knows where to start.

Creating momentum

Once the assessment is complete, the starting building blocks have been chosen, and the trust promise has been defined, the next step is simple: start.

Transformation is not about achieving perfection. It is about building skills and abilities through ongoing practice. Large organizations should not wait for the ideal structure, roadmap, governance model, or product team before getting started. The best way to build momentum is to take a practical first step, learn from it, and make improvements in the next round.

Apply a product mindset to your adoption strategy. Approach change as you would a minimum viable product: begin with a small step, test what works, learn from what does not, and keep making improvements.

To build momentum:

Focus on making the first version helpful, not perfect.

Create the simplest version of the change that can help the organization learn. Starting with a pilot, prototype, updated process, shared roadmap, new feedback loop, or clear ownership is enough to get going.

Learn from every attempt.

Treat every effort as a chance to gather evidence. Ask what went well, what did not, what slowed the team, what users needed, and what leaders should change next. Even failed attempts teach the organization something new.

Iterate quickly.

Use what the team learns to adjust the approach. Refine the product, the process, the governance model, the funding request, or the team structure. Continuous learning is the fastest path to better delivery.

Share progress often.

Change fatigue grows when people cannot see movement. Show the team what has changed, what has been delivered, what has been learned, and what is being adjusted. Make progress visible and regular.

Show that the plan is alive.

Do not let the roadmap become a static document. Update it as conditions change and explain what shifted and why. Teams are more likely to stay engaged when they can see that leaders are listening, learning, and adapting.

Celebrate every success.

Bring teams together often to recognize progress. Celebrate when a problem is solved, a decision is clarified, a user pain point is reduced, a system is retired, a handoff is improved, or a team learns a new way of working.

Track progress over time.

Every quarter, point out what has improved, and each year, show how the organization has changed. It is easier to keep momentum when people can see the results of their efforts adding up.

The aim is never to say transformation is finished. The real goal is to build a habit of continuous improvement: clearer ownership, stronger feedback, better alignment between funding and results, lasting product teams, and governance that supports delivery.

Start with this playbook from where your organization is now. Treat the building blocks as helpful guides. Pick a starting point, learn from your first version, share progress, celebrate what the team has achieved, and keep moving forward.

This is how organizations keep momentum, build skills, and earn trust over time.

About the Team

Solitaire Carroll is an award-winning technology executive and public sector strategist, currently serving as a contributor to the Niskanen Center’s State Capacity Team. She served as Co-Director of the Veteran Experience Services (VES) Portfolio at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, where she led one of the largest citizen-facing digital portfolios in the federal government—powering access to care and benefits for more than 9 million Veterans. Carroll co-authored the VA’s PACT Act benefits delivery 701b Modernization Plan and, in her role as portfolio director, oversaw the transformation of 48 legacy systems into 23 integrated, user-centric products. Under her leadership, the VES portfolio earned six national innovation awards, recognized for delivering accessible, equitable, and emotionally intelligent digital services. Carroll was named to the 2026 FedHealthIT 150, recognizing her as one of the most impactful and forward-thinking leaders in federal health technology. She holds a B.S. in Psychology from the University of York, UK.

Sara Thomas is a change leader and strategist with over 25 years of experience leading transformation across Federal agencies and industry including U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. Department Commerce, IBM, MITRE and Grant Thornton. She served as a strategist and writer of the Department of Veterans Affairs 5-Year Benefits Modernization Plan under 701b of the PACT Act. Sara is an awardee of the 2025 Forum Federal IT 100, the 2024 Inc. 5000, and the 2022 Inc. Best in Business. She is the former CEO of AWL Strategies, LLC and the founder of N+2, LLC.

Holly Sydnor is a strategic operations and communications leader focused on government modernization and institutional trust. She co-founded and served as COO of AWL Strategies and previously led communications and marketing efforts supporting the Department of Veterans Affairs, Food and Drug Administration, Grant Thornton, and other public-sector organizations. Sydnor has been recognized with a Gold Effie for advertising effectiveness, Ragan’s Top Women in Communications honor, and as a 40 Under 40 honoree from the Washington Business Journal. She holds an M.A. in Global Marketing, Communications and Advertising from Emerson College and a B.A. in History and Political Theory from the University of Virginia.

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Niskanen Center



BUILT TO DELIVER

A Product at Scale Playbook for Digital Modernization

Companion to the VA Digital Transformation Case Study “Built for the Veteran”

“You do not have to start over. You have to start from where you are.”