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Do what matters
Cities must move 311 beyond perfunctory tasks to data-driven experiences
The future lies in AI

Can you hear me now?

In the early 2000s, major metropolitan areas launched 311 call centers to much fanfare, promising to modernize the citizen experience and make their cities more accountable, responsive and efficient. Some even touted data-driven benchmarking.

Two decades later, many have struggled to reach those citizen service aspirations. Why? Yes, the financial challenges are real, but even thornier issues exist. Municipalities are grappling with legacy systems that are on premises in data centers structured only for telephony functionality. These systems were built before chat capabilities emerged and cannot support any type of multichannel expansion, even to the ubiquitous smartphone. They also need very experienced, specialized and expensive human resources to keep them running. And about those resources: most government workers have been in their roles for decades. They're on the cusp of retirement and may not be interested in moving beyond a basic operational mindset (my job is to make sure the server lights are blinking properly) to a user experience mindset (my job is to improve customer service with the technology available to me). Maybe most importantly, little has been done to address the agency silos that prevent data sharing and human collaboration.

Those cities that **have** started becoming more digital are mostly automating old processes instead of reimagining them. Automating to drive more efficiencies is certainly a positive step, but the technology exists today and is growing more advanced through AI to offer higher level predictive services to all stakeholders: residents, businesses and employees themselves.

It's time for government organizations not only to imagine what they can do with AI, but to put AI into action and create a more modern 311 platform.

What AI use cases are feasible today?

For residents, take something as simple as identity and identity access management. We commonly use driver's licenses to provide proof of our identity in order to access services based on who we are. The ubiquity of this form of identification has not yet taken root in the digital world, yet the potential exists to radically transform the level of service and interaction between residents and the agencies with whom they interact. Take for example a 311 inquiry regarding assistance for home heating. In normal situations the exchange would be a somewhat binary 'ask and answer' query. Imagine if through the course of the inquiry an AI chatbot was able to leverage a holistic view of the citizen and provide recommendations of additional services (assistance with utilities, social services, etc.) that would be relevant to that individual based on the context of the conversation.

Further, imagine if that AI chatbot could respond in multiple languages, while also leveraging the entire corpus of government services to ensure that all available services are presented to the citizen as applicable.

311 data is rich with information, and through generative AI, it can be used for intelligent segmentation to create hyperlocal and highly relevant newsletters based on a citizen's neighborhood, the services for which they've registered, their interaction history and stated preferences. One neighborhood may care more about tree pruning, another about trash on the streets and still another about broken sidewalks or potholes. Generative AI can also summarize actions taken – a great resource for politicians wanting to show progress.

And the same kind of proactive digital communication that the private sector uses (an online item left in a cart too long triggers a reminder email to complete the purchase) can make a big difference in citizen services. Indeed, water main maintenance notices should be sent digitally in addition to by mail, which citizens are checking with less and less frequency.

For businesses and historical and fine arts institutions, 311 is an important part of their economic engine. When visiting a city, tourists use the system for information on attractions. Instead of providing a static list of things to do, municipalities can use data and forecasting to make that information more interactive and relevant. (Is the person who's calling traveling with their family and looking for several days of ideas, or solo on business and looking for the top few things to do in a half day before heading to the airport?)

For government workers, generative AI can reduce call volume and handling times for agents by routing issues and cases in real time to the right resource. It can create emails and generate project plans and schedules to improve productivity. Speaking of productivity, it can provide 100% coverage of agent effectiveness evaluations and identify knowledge gaps in the systems that are creating roadblocks to successful resolutions. As to the goldmine of 311 data mentioned previously, consider this scenario: if an agent can see that a citizen has called ten times in the past 30 days, what can they intuit from that? Perhaps a "hotspot" is developing that the streets and sanitation department needs to investigate. Or, perhaps this person can be recruited to a resident focus group based on their knowledge of the neighborhood.

To create a modern 311 system, start here.

Holistic vision

Cities must ask the bigger question and think more holistically about their network of agencies, the services they provide and how they serve their customers. Government is currently set up in an isolated way, which is evident in the procurement process for example. At Avanade, we regularly see RFPs being issued by separate agencies, unbeknownst to each other, that are redundant or at the very least indicate that the proposed technology programs would be better together. While in the private sector, a CEO can communicate a vision and marshal all business units across the enterprise around that agenda, in government, a mayor or administration typically leaves it up to each agency to execute their vision. It gets done in some fashion, but without the same level of optimization or synchronization found in the private sector. Once a citizen or employee kicks off a request in their 311 system, there's no reason why it can't trigger a "connecting of dots" to all other agencies that need to be involved.

Unified data structure

Unless the data from different agencies is talking to each other, cities will never achieve the 311 system of the future with multichannel experiences for their citizens and workers. This means moving beyond the concept of firewalls (that keep everything an employee does fenced in by a digital barrier) to something that is fungible and portable but still secure in the cloud. This type of platform allows for a common data store that houses structured data for key business entities and a separation of data for privacy and compliance but still allows for collaboration and sharing. A data lake connects all business entities to each other and to external sources, and applications can be designed for specific internal and external users. In more advanced scenarios, data integration and application programming interfaces are possible to create even deeper stakeholder value through extended capabilities.

Change management program

AI must be people first, so think about the adoption, culture and organizational change elements that need to happen on your 311-modernization journey. Study the modifications of work and how it's affecting functions and tasks. HR and training teams should be involved early to understand new roles, new ways of working and the impacts on worker skilling and sourcing. Employees need to understand and embrace their new way of working if you want the technology to light up and bring your vision to life.

Choosing the right partner.

If Microsoft tools are part of your plan for modernization, as is the case for many cities choosing to standardize on this platform, then you need a trusted partner to unlock their full potential.

Avanade is the world's most experienced innovator on the Microsoft platform, and we're at the forefront of helping hundreds of organizations and government agencies experiment with and pilot new AI capabilities. We have deep experience in government and in government cloud environments, and we know that your number one issue is cybersecurity and the many vulnerabilities that exist across your agencies. As a 2024 IDC MarketScape: Worldwide Cybersecurity Consulting Services Leader, we're uniquely qualified to build a robust cyber resilience framework that prioritizes both prevention and recovery so that you can protect the trust of everyone you serve.

But security is just one component of our expertise. We're a full-service provider, bringing leadership in advisory, experiences and technology to help cities make a genuine human impact with their Microsoft platform investments.

Just as your 311 system is the connective tissue across many city agencies, be it police, fire department, health and human services, board of education and more, the right technology and advisory partner will be the connective tissue to ensure that your people, processes and technology are ready to use AI to transform citizen engagement. If you're ready to start building the 311 system of the future, let's talk.

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