The 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act: A mandate to catch up with constituents' digital expectations

Developments in technology are transforming nearly every industry— and government is no exception. Today, federal, state, and local government agencies are seeking to improve the way they engage with constituents online, and how they deliver public services. Comprehensive design standards released in January 2020 will enable agencies to comply with the 21st Century IDEA Act, which requires all digital services offered by government agencies to have a base level of quality and accessibility.

What's the IDEA?

The 21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act (IDEA) is designed to compel federal agencies to deliver the kind of web experiences and customer service that consumers typically expect from private sector businesses today. The legislation requires that public-facing government agency websites must:

— Accelerate the use of electronic signatures.
— Offer mobile-friendly digital options for all paper-based forms.
— Make customer experience a priority in the federal IT strategy.

While mobile friendliness and e-signature capabilities are the attention-grabbing requirements, IDEA also mandates that government websites:

— Be accessible to individuals with disabilities
— Have a consistent appearance
— Avoid overlapping with or duplicating any legacy websites
— Contain a search function

— Be provided through an industry standard secure connection
— Be designed around user needs with data-driven analysis influencing management and development decisions, using qualitative and quantitative data to determine user goals, needs, and behaviors, and continually test the website or digital service to ensure that user needs are addressed.
— Provide the option for a more customized digital experience that allows users to complete digital transactions in an efficient and accurate manner.
— Be fully functional and usable on common mobile devices.

Comprehensive standards are now available

In January of 2020, the Technology Transformation Service (an arm of the General Services Administration) issued a complete set of design standards to help agencies quickly deploy user-friendly sites that comply with IDEA standards, and upgrade legacy sites incrementally. The standards are known as the U.S. Web Design System, or USWDS. The USWDS is a free, open-source toolkit of principles, guidance, and code that helps digital teams to build accessible, mobile-friendly sites for the public.

The USWDS is based on five design principles that serve as a guide for making design and technical decisions.

1. Start with real user needs: Real needs should inform decisions.
2. Earn trust: Trust must be earned with every interaction.
3. Embrace accessibility: Accessibility affects everybody, and should be built into every decision.
4. Promote continuity: Provide consistency throughout services, over time, and across agencies, platforms, and devices.
5. Listen: Listen to your audience and use what you hear to evaluate and improve.

Agencies aren't expected to adopt the entire design system at once. Instead, the government recommends they adopt the USWDS incrementally, and prioritize implementation efforts to align with their existing modernization plans.

Toward that end, the government has developed a maturity model, which provides a practical plan for agencies to build solutions that meet their needs, and to adapt to the USWDS as they utilize it. The maturity model consists of three phases of progress toward full compliance.

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Phase 1: integrate design principles
Phase 2: Follow user experience guidance
Phase 3: Utilize the USWDS code

The full USWDS can be found at
https://designsystem.digital.gov/website-standards/

Public benefits

The IDEA act is good news for the public, who can expect easier-to-use, more accessible websites, the convenience of e-signatures, and an overall improved experience when interacting with the federal government. It also promises to save taxpayer dollars by, among other things, dramatically reducing the need to print out paper documents. (The federal government reportedly spends $38 million each year on managing paperwork.)

How progress will be monitored

The IDEA act required all executive agency heads to deliver a plan to both Congress and the Office of Management and Budget by June of 2019. The reports detailed how the agencies planned to accelerate the use of electronic signatures. The legislation also includes a provision requiring annual progress reports for the next five years.

"There is an incredible opportunity for government agencies to engage citizens and be responsive to their needs through a personalized citizen experience built on their prior government interactions. The government has been talking about doing this for years and the 21st Century IDEA Act gives them a nudge to move in the right direction."

-- Saurabh Verma, managing director, Acumen Solutions (a provider of customer-centric experience solutions for the federal government.)

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A new focus on data

The act also encourages data-driven decision-making. Section 6 calls for agencies to "identify areas of concern that need improvement and improve the delivery of customer service by using qualitative and quantitative data obtained from across the executive agency relating to the experience and satisfaction of customers."

As a result of this mandate, it will be vital for agencies to initiate processes for gathering, processing, and acting upon user feedback.

Employees win, too

The benefits of IDEA aren't limited to constituents. Government employees can expect their experiences with internal website to improve, as well.

As mandated in Section 3 of the legislation, "The head of each executive agency shall ensure, to the greatest extent practicable, that any intranet established after the date of enactment of this Act conforms to the requirements described in subsection (a)."

Agencies face plenty of challenges

Siloed systems and outdated technology, often inherent in government technology, present potential roadblocks.

As William Eggers writes in *Delivering on Digital, the Innovators and Technologies That Are Transforming Government*, "Most governments rely on a sprawling patchwork of systems to identify and manage information about people, using everything from passwords to smart cards to biometrics. At the same time, the data must be tagged so that only the right users have access. Unfortunately, these elements rarely come together in a way that seems convenient or logical to the end user, whether it's a constituent, a business, or even a public employee. Constituents typically can't file their taxes without re-entering information several times; agency employees are often locked out of buildings they should be able to enter because ID cards are handled building by building, or regionally. These disconnects can be frustrating at best and crippling at worst."

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Additional characteristics common in the public sector can also slow the ability of agencies to accelerate digitization and comply with IDEA. Prolonged procurement processes, constrained budgets, multiple layers of approval, and other factors can conspire to thwart the efforts of IT departments in the public sector.

To succeed, agencies must change themselves, too

Successfully implementing the required transformation may mean changing agency culture. That could include listening to staff feedback, effectively communicating the need for change, and harnessing the power of open collaboration.

To meet the new mandates, the public sector needs to leverage open standards, interoperable technology, shared platforms, and reusable business capabilities to deliver the end-to-end services demanded by their constituents.

Importantly, the IDEA transformation must put the customer—the constituent—at the center of the effort.

According to Implementing a Citizen-Centric Approach to Delivering Government Services from McKinsey, "The key to good digital services is understanding the user's perspective. Governments must be willing to remake products, processes, and policies around what constituents want."

Acquia can help

Acquia is well positioned to help government agencies catch up with the digital expectations of today's constituents, and comply with the requirements of IDEA. We offer the infrastructure, people, skill set, and support to help solve the digital challenges government faces.

Acquia has been granted an Authority to Operate (ATO) by the U.S. Department of Treasury under the Federal Risk and Authorization Management Program (FedRAMP).

FedRAMP is a government-wide program that provides a standardized approach to security assessment, authorization, and continuous monitoring for cloud products and services.

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The federal government spends hundreds of millions of dollars a year securing the use of IT systems; FedRAMP provides assurance to agencies that the appropriate security and risk management practices are in place for their cloud properties. Only cloud providers that meet the strict provisions of FedRAMP gain this certification.

The security, reliability, and agility of Acquia's agile platform enables government departments and agencies to properly align their resources and deliver on their mission.

The benefits are clear:

— Simple: Spend less time building, and lower your development and maintenance costs.
— Scalable: Grow to meet demand, increase efficiency, secure your data, and streamline your workflows for developers and marketers.
— Intelligent: More accurate data and automated insights to personalize customer journeys.

To learn more about how Acquia can help transform your own organization's customer experience, visit **acquia.com/solutions/government**.

About Acquia

Acquia is the open source digital experience company. We provide the world's most ambitious brands with technology that allows them to embrace innovation and create customer moments that matter. At Acquia, we believe in the power of community—giving our customers the freedom to build tomorrow on their terms. Acquia has been recognized as a leader among industry analysts and is the only digital experience platform on the Forbes Cloud 100.

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