

# Culture comes first

**In a roundtable discussion, industry executives stressed the importance of understanding customer culture for app modernization projects to succeed.**

BY NICK WAKEMAN

*Application modernization is more than just writing new software and redesigning processes.*

*As technology-rich as these projects can be, the key to success lies in the customer's culture. Understanding a customer's culture drives the first questions contractors need to ask.*

*The answers to those questions can determine a bid-or-no-bid decision, according to a group of industry executives we gathered to discuss the challenges and opportunities in app modernization projects.*

*We operated under Chatham House rules to facilitate an open discussion. The conversation was on the record, but not for individual or company attribution. See page 106 for a list of the executives who participated in the February roundtable.*

## **CULTURE IS KEY**

App modernization projects follow the classic formula of people, process and technology.

"But the part that always gets skipped is that it is all bound together by culture," one exec said. "The minute you separate a technical solution from the culture, you fail."

A customer's culture generally falls into one of seven buckets:

- Mission-focused
- Budget-sensitive
- Efficiency-driven
- Risk-averse
- Risk taker
- Fear-based
- Fact-based

The worst is a fear-based culture, because contractors are always reacting to the customer's fear and the wrong decisions get made, a second exec said.

"If it is fact-based, you can lay it all out there and make a wise decision based on what's in front of you," the second exec added.

No matter the culture, participants largely agreed that contractors must enter app modernization projects with a change management plan.

"You need a robust change management plan, and you have to constantly work with the end users to help them understand what is coming," one attendee said.

The last thing you want is for end users to be surprised. "When they get something new, you want them to say, 'Oh, yeah, it's not a big deal,'" another said.

A third executive said people may consider change management and culture to be the "soft stuff," but it is crucial.

"When you don't get it right, people don't adopt the new

process and they'll find work-arounds," that exec said. "Then your data goes out the window, your security goes out the window, and then it becomes just another failed technology implementation."

Another exec added other so-called soft areas to the list, such as expectation management, customer experience and human-centered design. "It's all integrated and related," the exec said.

"Inseparable," another added.

## **WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?**

A critical component of success is defining what it looks like.

One executive shared a story of sitting down with three people from the same customer and realizing that they had three different visions of what a successful project would be.

"We said, 'Do you guys need a minute?'" that exec said. "We stepped out, and after half an hour they apologized and said, 'We now think we know what we want.'"

Measures of success can change as well. In the early days of the move to the cloud, the emphasis was on closing data centers. It was about "lift and shift," one executive said. "We were talking about closing doors and turning out lights instead of thoughtfully thinking through a road map."

The primary measure today should be customer experience, another exec said.

"We should be talking about velocity and return on investment and not just cost reduction," that exec said, adding that Congress also puts too much emphasis on cost reduction when talking about modernization. "They ex-



pect a check back, and there's not a check."

Agencies have so much technical debt that there is a backlog of things that need to be done but aren't getting done.

"Modernization doesn't really save costs, but it gets better mission results," one

exec said.

The focus on mission is critical, the executives agreed.

#### CREDIBILITY MATTERS

One exec told a story about a customer that wanted to move off its mainframes into the cloud. Instead of doing a massive shift, this company went

component by component and modernized applications for a cloud environment.

"We took advantage of the cloud services and got quick wins," the exec said. The early focus was on simple components. "We got points on the board faster, and we saved the complex stuff for later."

The "points on the board" helped the company manage expectations and build the contractor's credibility.

"By moving bit by bit, we were more successful from a client perspective, from the security perspective, and ultimately we bought down the technical debt," said the exec.

This kind of relationship with the customer takes time, participants agreed.

They warned about customers who write narrow requirements in their contracts, because this approach makes it harder to innovate and bring new ideas.

"You need a customer who is willing to take a breath before they dive in," one attendee said. "We try to convince our customers to build a

digital road map with us."

Questions to try to answer include:

- What mission are you trying to accomplish?
- Where are you today?
- Where do you want to be?
- What is your time frame?
- What is your budget?

"You need to take the time, and honestly it doesn't take forever," an exec said.

The conversation often returned to the importance of softer skills — in particular, the need for clear communication with the customer to help build and maintain trust.

"Transparency and constant conversation are two things that can help you," one exec said.

A contractor has to be able to say, "We're struggling and here's why, but here is what we plan to try to do to fix it," the exec added. "That's a different conversation."

If you don't do that, it's hard to overcome problems when they occur. "You can't hold your cards to your chest," one said. "That's no way to run a railroad." //

#### PARTICIPANTS

##### Mark Adams

VP, Technology and Engineering, Peraton

##### George Batsakis

CEO, Groundswell

##### Mike Callihan

President, Aegis

##### Brian Drake

Federal Chief Technology Officer, Accrete AI

##### Greg Gershman

CEO, Ad Hoc LLC

##### Margie Graves

Senior Fellow, IBM Center for the Business of Government

##### Joe Kovba

VP, Digital Modernization Transition, Leidos

##### Andrew Lasko

Federal Alliances, Veeam

##### Robert Lohfeld

CEO, Sev1Tech

##### Reuben Maher

Chief Strategy and Growth Officer, A-TEK

##### Ryan McKeon

Partner, Guidehouse

##### Kim Pack

President, Applied Information Services

##### Eric Schlesinger

Senior Technical Leader, Parsons

##### Nic Skirpan

Director of Growth, Bravium Consulting

##### Matt Slotten

Principal Solutions Architect, Cloud-Native Technical Partnerships, Veeam

##### Don Styer

Chief Technology Officer, Serco

##### Monica Winthrop

SVP, Consulting Services, CGI Federal

Washington  
Technology

**NOTE:** Washington Technology Editor-in-Chief Nick Wakeman led the roundtable discussion. The February gathering was underwritten by Veeam, but both the substance of the discussion and the published article are strictly editorial products. Neither Veeam nor any of the participants had input beyond their comments.