POLICY & PRACTICE

Emerging Technology and Process Innovation
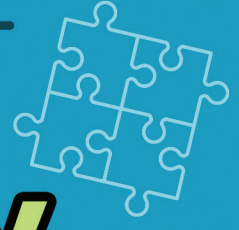
Modernizing for the Future of Human Services

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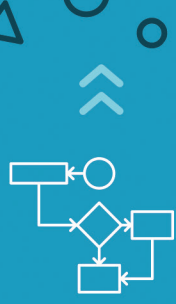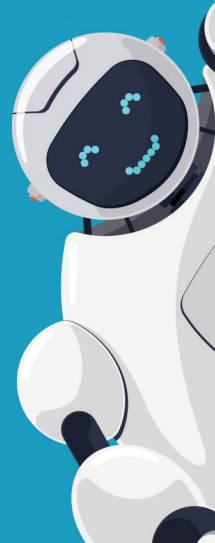
By Jamia McDonald, Hari Murthy, Naman Chaurasia, Shawn Bowers, Will Arnold, Michael J. Walsh, and Tiffany Dovey Fishman

How AI integration Is Transforming Service Delivery: Agencies Integrating GenAI with Other Automation Tools—and Human Judgment

Human services agencies across the country are exploring how to use generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) and traditional AI tools to ease the workload for overburdened staff and provide constituents a more responsive, higher-quality customer experience. Their goals are two-fold:

- To accelerate efficiency improvement by automating tasks that have historically required significant manual, human intervention
- To personalize service delivery for constituents by analyzing behavior patterns and preferences to make service recommendations

Many states are beginning to ideate GenAI use cases, experiment with proofs of concept, and evaluate the early-stage capabilities needed to realize value (Figure 1). Other states have moved to incorporate AI and GenAI pilots into their ongoing digital transformation efforts. While each state's AI journey looks different, the theme remains consistent: many agencies are seeking new ways of working that can support their workforce in delivering better mission outcomes.

Early GenAI Pilots

While it's still early days for human services agencies' use of GenAI, pilots are beginning to show promising results in improving service delivery. Illinois and Oregon have operationalized AI use cases and are already realizing value while collecting insights that will inform future implementations.

The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services added GenAI to its suite of automation capabilities when modernizing the department's modular web-based system for child welfare workers. IllinoisConnect's AI-powered policy bot allows nearly 1,000 employees to search and retrieve key insights across more than 6,700 pages of written policy, procedures, and laws, boosting the agency's capacity to support front-line caseworkers with navigating complex situations involving children and families. Workers submit plain-English questions in a simple user interface and, within seconds, receive a summarized answer, exact citations from written policy, and links to source materials. The policy bot's rapid responses reference up-to-date statutory authority, department rules, procedures, and policy documents.

Farther west, the Oregon Department of Human Services and Oregon Health Authority have made

Illustration by Chris Campbell

progress on multiple customer experience initiatives for the 1.5 million Oregonians they serve. To provide customers with 24x7 navigation support and answers, the agencies implemented service assistant chatbots on the Oregon Eligibility (ONE) Applicant Portal, the online platform for applying and managing Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and child care benefits. The service assistance chatbots use various AI technologies to interact with more than 30,000 customers online every quarter, responding to questions on more than 200 topics. In fulfilling nearly three-quarters of requests, the chatbots have helped boost customer satisfaction 27 percent since initial implementation. Additionally, Oregon recently piloted a new GenAI solution called ORBIT with the statewide operations support and help desk teams. ORBIT enables staff to quickly receive answers to complex questions across the universe of various program policy and procedures documentation, along with citations and references.

Preparing for GenAI

With use cases illustrating how human services agencies can use GenAI to optimize service delivery, now is the time for leaders to start scaling and planning for longer-term solutions. As agencies realize value from their AI investments and establish clear governance and ownership over the capability, leaders should define

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and enforce leading standards while ensuring that tools are current.

GenAI can open up transformative possibilities for agencies when thoughtfully paired with complementary AI tools and human judgment. Yet the path to adopting this new technology can be daunting. Many employees may find GenAI possibilities exciting even as others voice apprehension. While a prepared workforce is essential to successful AI implementation and adoption, 62 percent of surveyed workers said they do not have the skills to use GenAI effectively and safely.[1] It is critical for leaders to take steps to build workforce skills to adopt GenAI, articulate guardrails, and communicate goals early and often to mitigate risk. To prepare the workforce for what's to come, leaders should consider the following:

- **Share the vision:** Convene the agency around the GenAI vision, importance of workforce readiness,

and value potential for the organization's mission.

- **Open lines of communication:** Keep the workforce informed about the agency's vision for GenAI use, the safeguards in place to mitigate risk, and the expected benefits from adoption. Regularly communicate updates and milestones, including the introduction of approved GenAI technology, and the rationale behind decision making. Establishing a GenAI center of excellence can facilitate sharing of best practices across the organization.
- **Become familiar with underlying technology:** Because GenAI is a rapidly evolving technology, it's important to establish a baseline

Figure 1. Agencies are at different stages of their generative AI journey
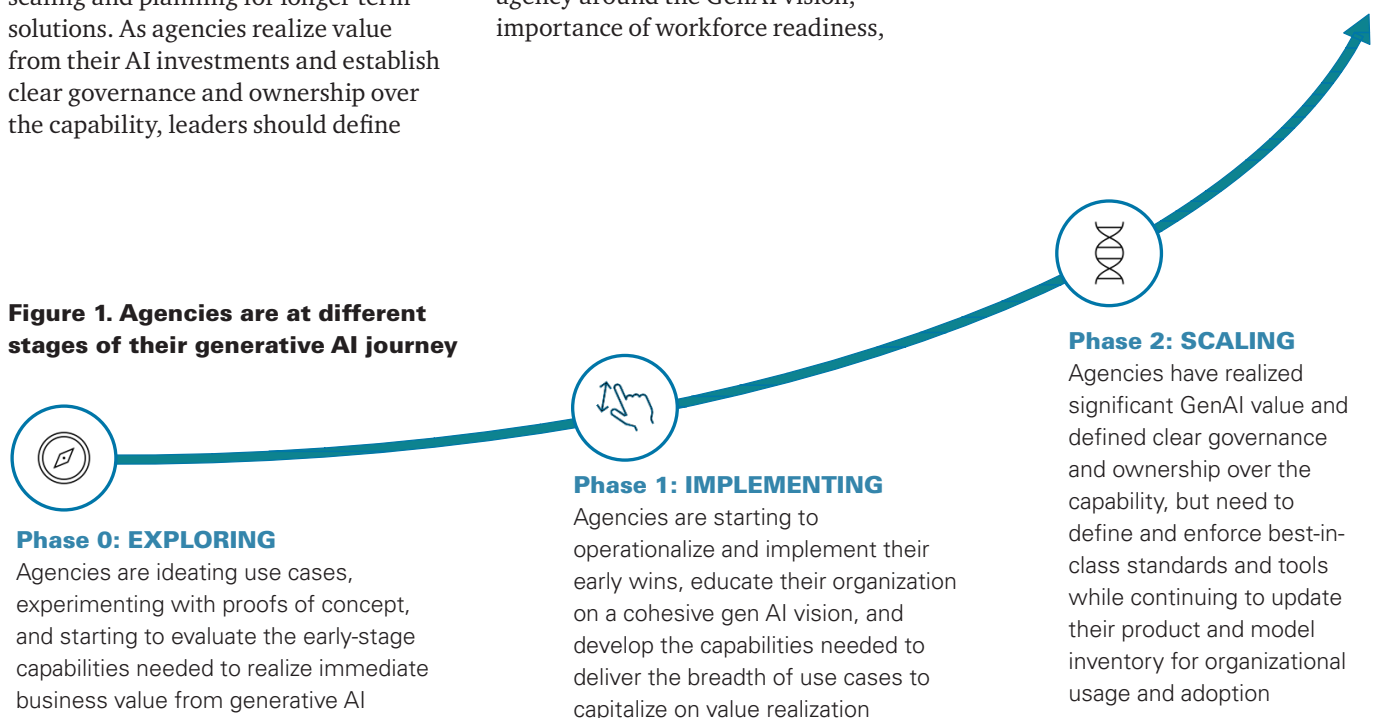
Phase 0: EXPLORING
Agencies are ideating use cases, experimenting with proofs of concept, and starting to evaluate the early-stage capabilities needed to realize immediate business value from generative AI

Phase 1: IMPLEMENTING
Agencies are starting to operationalize and implement their early wins, educate their organization on a cohesive gen AI vision, and develop the capabilities needed to deliver the breadth of use cases to capitalize on value realization

Phase 2: SCALING
Agencies have realized significant GenAI value and defined clear governance and ownership over the capability, but need to define and enforce best-in-class standards and tools while continuing to update their product and model inventory for organizational usage and adoption

level of knowledge about the technology, the risks it carries, and its capabilities, and to continually monitor its evolution.

- **Provide opportunities for upskilling and engagement:** Offer learning opportunities to your workforce such as GenAI literacy training for your full organization and Prompt Engineering training for upskilling technical staff.
- **Reimagine use cases:** Think big and identify ways human services agencies can leverage GenAI to address problems that haven't yet been solved. An outcome-driven approach, aligned to an agency's mission, can help maximize use of the technology.
- **Put users at the center:** GenAI's success depends on human involvement. Collect insights from end-users such as caseworkers and clients using human-centered design methodologies when crafting GenAI applications.
- **Invest in trust and governance:** Trust is critical to the adoption of AI by caseworkers and clients. Ethical controls should be embedded in every step of model development, underlying data and bias protection, and change management for adoption.
- **Promote ethics:** Empower employees to effectively use AI and identify bias while also promoting open dialogue on how AI is used within their organization.

Looking ahead

As agencies continue implementing and expanding AI capabilities, it's critical to adhere to the federal government's current and future AI regulations and standards. The U.S. Food and Nutrition Service, for instance, has developed a *Framework for State, Local, Tribal, and Territorial Use of Artificial Intelligence for Public Benefit Administration*,[2] which includes:

- Protecting rights and safety and advancing equity
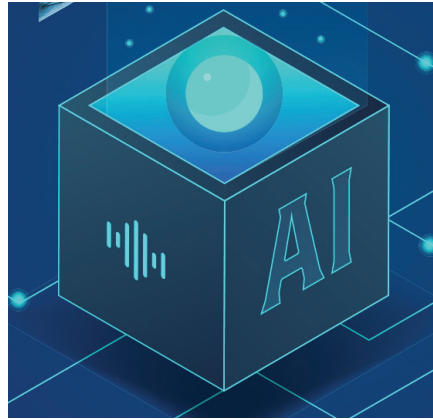
- Upholding accountability for program decisions and operations
- Promoting responsible innovation that engenders public trust

In alignment with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' *Policy Recommendations for Advancing Responsible AI Innovation*,[3] state agencies should monitor their AI strategy and practices to confirm that initiatives are furthering and enhancing outcomes. Staying focused on outcomes, open to adaptation, and coupling emerging AI technology with a sound strategy will help human services agencies optimize service delivery and reimagine the future. **P&P**

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Reference Notes
1. Salesforce. (2023). New research: Over half of workers say generative AI will help advance their career, but most lack the skills. *https://www.salesforce.com/news/stories/generative-ai-skills-research*
2. *https://www.fns.usda.gov/framework-artificial-intelligence-public-benefit*
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