

Modernizing Government to Meet 21st Century Realities: A Conversation with Margaret Weichert, Deputy Director for Management, Office of Management and Budget

By Michael J. Keegan



Most Americans may not think about the U.S. federal government every day—but when they need government services, they expect it to work. As technology, e-commerce, and customer needs have evolved, government institutions have some catching up to do. The U.S. federal

government still operates many capabilities and processes established in the mid-20th century— if not earlier—despite dramatic changes in technology, society, and the needs of the American people in this Digital Age.

Margaret Weichert, deputy director for Management, Office of Management and Budget (OMB), joined me on *The Business of Government Hour* to discuss the Trump administration’s vision for modernizing the U.S. federal government to meet the mission, service, and stewardship realities of the 21st century.



On Leading OMB’s Management Mission

I lead the management side of OMB, which develops and executes a governmentwide management agenda that includes information technology, financial management, procurement, performance, and human resources. The management side of OMB is comprised of offices that oversee and coordinate the administration’s procurement, financial management, e-government, performance and personnel management, and information and regulatory policies.

I’ll give you a brief overview of some of these areas that comprise the management portfolio. The Office of Federal Procurement Policy (OFPP) works with agencies to improve federal procurement practices that affect the full range of federal acquisitions. The Office of Federal Financial Management (OFFM) develops and provides direction to improve financial management and systems. The Office of E-Government and Information Technology, headed by the federal government’s Chief Information Officer Suzette Kent,

develops and provides direction in the use of information technology to deliver on government missions. The Office of Performance and Personnel Management (OPPM) works with agencies to encourage use and communication of performance information and to improve results and transparency. OPPM also works closely with the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to advance effective personnel practices.

On Transforming How Government Works

Our vision for government modernization as outlined in the President’s Management Agenda (PMA) started by focusing on those government serves—our customers, the citizen who use government services. Trust in government is at an all-time low. We wanted to understand the causes and identify ways to modernize and improve how government delivers on its various missions. We looked at specific functions and sought to identify where government agencies are failing to connect.

Fundamentally, this failing relates to our service delivery and a business model, if you will, that has its roots in fighting the Cold War with process and institutional approaches dating back to the 1950s. This operational model is far from agile. In the 21st century, agility powered by IT, powered by data, and powered by people is how leading players execute, differentiate, and build trust.

Many of the jobs we can't fill today, nobody could have conceived of even 10 years ago, let alone 50 years ago. How we can acquire goods and services has changed with online marketplaces that provide you real-time information about both prices and activity. The way we hire and compensate hasn't kept up with what is considered commonplace today. The American people see and experience these changes and the federal government needs to catch up to meet these expectations. We need to remove structural obstacles that make it impossible for today's federal government to adapt to changing technology and workforce needs. We recognized that government must transform its outdated approaches, technology, and skill sets so that the workforce of today can meet the needs and expectations of the public tomorrow.

Rather than pursue short-term fixes that quickly become outdated, we initially focused on investing in deep-seated transformation through the PMA centering on:

- Deliver mission outcomes
- Provide excellent service
- Effectively steward taxpayer dollars

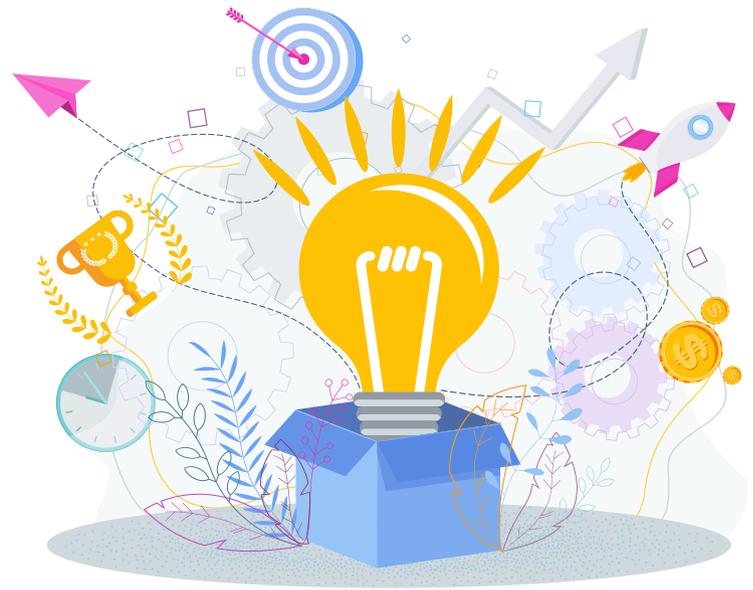
To move from vision to action, the administration identified the need to modernize several key drivers of transformation:

- Modern information technology
- Data, accountability, and transparency
- Building a modern workforce

In order to advance change across the federal enterprise, we established Cross-Agency Priority, or CAP, goals for each of these three key areas. We have a list of priorities under each. I invite you to visit [performance.gov](https://www.performance.gov) for more detail on each of these goals as well as their priorities. There you can get a sense of what is being done and the quarterly progress made under each goal.

On Thinking Outside the Box

Being results oriented, I believe there is always a potential solution if you just keep looking and asking questions. Washington, D.C., is a place of laws and regulation. Such



a place does not necessarily give way to outside-the-box thinking. Sometimes this is necessary, but when you are managing the business of government we need leaders who are constantly asking questions, inquiring about how might we achieve this same objective within the construct of existing law or within the construct of new legislation. How do we bring new thinking to the table? How do you leverage and use innovation happening in the private sector? How do you apply that innovation to a world that isn't about profit and loss? In government, our focus has to be about mission, service, and stewardship.

During my tenure, simply asking different questions has led people to get energized and to free people up to say, if we run down a path and we find out we're not able to do it that way, what is the next way? And the next way? And oh, by the way, let's document all of the paths taken: testing hypotheses, running them down, documenting activities, and outcomes. A test or path taken that leads to a dead end is not a failure if you document what didn't work and why. Doing this can inspire new paths forward while possibly identifying better approaches and solutions.

On Optimizing Across the Federal Enterprise

Modernizing government for the 21st century involves getting the right people in the right jobs at the right time in order to focus on mission, service, and stewardship. Often when we talk about personnel management in the federal government, we tend to get lost in the mechanics of getting people in and out of government. Sometimes focusing on

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the mechanics and process we can lose sight of our overall purpose: why we are here to begin with. Keeping the mission of government front and center is key.

For a period of time, I was also the acting director of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management. This role, which tends to focus on human capital from an operational perspective, complemented my OMB role where I approach government policy, including HR, from a strategic perspective. Having both perspectives afforded me an opportunity to look at the personnel function from end to end, finding more effective ways to help federal agencies address the complex and critical human capital challenges they face.

Doing both roles, I also began to see the importance of jettisoning siloes and working towards optimization across agencies, whether doing IT modernization, personnel management, procurement, or leveraging data.

On the Technology Modernization Fund

The Technology Modernization Fund (TMF) was authorized by Congress as a mechanism to finance technology modernization efforts across the federal government. It is an innovative funding model that allows agencies to accelerate key IT modernization projects. It seeks to enable agencies to reimagine and transform the way they use technology to deliver their mission and services to the American public in an effective, efficient, and secure manner. We're making investments in incremental, agile ways, not spending millions on critical IT and then having the agencies come back for more monies when they've proven it out.



The fiscal year funding of \$100 million followed by \$25 million in 2019 has enabled us to fund projects with U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), along with a host of other agencies. USDA's Farmers.gov was one of the earliest projects seeking to provide a one-stop-shop for self-service applications, educational materials, and business tools for farmers, ranchers, conservationists, and private foresters. With this project, the department has made incredible strides towards modernizing their core infrastructure and becoming much more service oriented to support farmers, producers, and ranchers across the country. The fund was designed to have initially funded project payback the fund. This way the fund wouldn't solely rely on annual appropriations. Some of the earlier funded proposals are starting to be set towards repayment. If you'd like more detailed information on the TMF, go to tmf.cio.gov.

On Establishing Government Effectiveness Advanced Research Centers

When I came from the private sector to government, I noticed at-risk capital from the private sector wasn't really being deployed to help government with its unique management challenges. Let me provide some context. The federal government has been slower than the private sector to adapt operations to new realities. These failures mean we are not meeting the public's expectations as I mentioned earlier, and that our use of resources is less than optimal. Moreover, reliance on outdated technology has led to a workforce insufficiently equipped to transition to more modern ways of doing business. We conceived of the Government Effectiveness Advanced Research (GEAR) Center as a nongovernmental public-private partnership that would engage researchers, academics, nonprofits, and private industry from disciplines ranging from behavioral economics, computer science, and design thinking. The goal is to use creative, data-driven, and interdisciplinary approaches to reimagine and realize new possibilities in how citizens and government interact.

Working with the General Services Administration (GSA), we launched a competition to create a GEAR Center to address challenges facing the federal government. The intent is to have the centers provide the federal government with the opportunity to not only catch up to where the private sector services and capabilities are today, but also to lay the groundwork for where government operations and services need to be in five, ten, twenty years or more. It would provide capacity to explore questions concerning how government can best harness technological advances to



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address evolving challenges concerning citizen interactions with the government, federal workforce skill/reskilling requirements, the leveraging of big data, and collaboration with the private sector via grantmaking, procurement, and public-private partnerships.

On September 10, OMB along with GSA announced three grand prize winners of the GEAR challenge. Each winner receives an award of \$300,000 each. Five honorable mentions were also selected from the pool of highly competitive applicants. The grand prize winners will focus on such topics as cybersecurity workforce collaboration, data for impact, and data and evidence for government and academic impact. Our hope is once we get the GEAR Centers fully launched, we can fund with capital that would come in from the private sector as well as from grants and other government funding sources.

On Recognizing the Federal Workforce

I am very excited about the Gears of Government Award program. This program recognizes the contributions of individuals and teams across the federal workforce who make a profound difference in the lives of the American people. Whether they are defending the homeland, inspecting our food, making scientific discoveries, or

managing cyber risks, federal employees underpin all the operations of our government and touch nearly every aspect of our lives. These awards recognize not just the front-line mission employees, but also those teams and individuals that are strengthening our country to be a more modern, effective government to better serve their fellow citizens. This year the award recipients include employees and teams from federal agencies, including NASA and the departments of Defense, Health and Human Services, Energy, Veterans Affairs, Agriculture, and Transportation. This program underscores that the heart and soul of any federal agency are its people and recognizing them is critically important.

To learn more about the Office of Management and Budget, go to omb.gov.



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