

Providing Mission-Support Services Across Government: Insights from Allison Brigati, Deputy Administrator, U.S. General Services Administration

By Michael J. Keegan



Over the last seven decades, the nation's population has more than doubled. The price of real estate in major cities has skyrocketed and super computers have gone from filling three-story rooms to fitting in your pockets. The world has become vastly more interconnected and federal

agencies are striving to match the pace of change, evolving to meet new domestic and global challenges and better serve the American public.

The U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) is working with federal agencies on multiple fronts to save taxpayer dollars and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the federal government. This unique mission support role ties back to GSA's founding in 1949 when President Truman sought to create one agency to help the federal government avoid senseless duplication, excess cost, and confusion in handling supplies and providing space. Today, GSA fulfills this mission, pursuing a wide range of programs that support partner federal agencies with their real property, procurement, information technology, and shared service's needs.

What are GSA's strategic priorities? How is it providing mission support services to federal agencies? Allison Brigati, deputy administrator at GSA, joined me on *The Business of Government Hour* to share her insights on these topics and more. The following is an edited excerpt of our discussion, complemented with additional research.

What are GSA's current strategic priorities?



We have four priorities. Our first priority is to save taxpayer money through better management of federal real estate. The second priority is to establish GSA as the premiere provider of efficient and effective acquisition solutions across the federal government. Our third priority involves improving the way federal agencies buy, build, and use technology. Lastly, we want to design and deliver expanded shared services within GSA, and across the federal government to improve performance and save taxpayer money.

Would you briefly describe the mission, continued evolution, and operational footprint of the U.S. General Services Administration?



GSA's mission is to deliver value and savings in real estate acquisition, technology, and other mission support services across government. In July 2019, we celebrated our 70th anniversary. As we reflected on the agency's history, it is amazing to see how stable our mission has been over the years. President Truman established the agency in 1949 wanting to create an agency to help the government avoid senseless duplication, excess cost, and confusion in handling supplies and providing space. While the mission has been quite steady, we are always evolving in not just how we deliver on this critical mission support role for the government, but also in what we deliver.

An example of how we have evolved over the last few years, we have been keenly focused—as a result of positive policy and industry shifts—on customer experience and data driven policy and decision making. If not the first, we were one of



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the first agencies to create the roles of the chief customer officer and the chief data officer. As part of our evolution, the delivery of technology services has become a major line of business for GSA. In addition, we play significant roles in promoting management best practices and efficient government operations through the development of governmentwide policies. That function resides in Office of Government-wide Policy, which I led when I first came to GSA.

GSA's scale of operation is pretty significant. We have more than 11,000 employees, \$24 billion in annual revenues, \$43 billion in assets, including property, vehicles, and office equipment. A gross annual budget authority of \$9.7 billion and an additional \$17.8 billion in obligations, supporting approximately \$68 billion in annual contracts. For context, our annual revenue puts us roughly in the top quarter of Fortune 500 companies, so we're just a few spots below a very well-known coffee company. On the real estate side, with more than 368 million rentable square feet in over 8,700 active assets, we administer one of the largest and most diversified real estate portfolios in the world.

In terms of the policy side, most significantly I'm sure you've heard of the Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR). The FAR set the rules that govern the more than \$500 billion in annual procurement spend by the federal government. We manage the FAR in coordination with NASA, Department of Defense (DoD), and the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

What are the duties of GSA's deputy administrator?



I am the chief operating officer for the agency. I manage the day-to-day operations. While I do get engaged in our core business lines, my day to day focus is on managing the internal operations of GSA. The C-Suite reports up through me, which include IT, finance, human resources, as well as the Office of Administrative Services, basically a mini-GSA within GSA, and Office of Customer Experience. Managing

the CXOs account for roughly 2,000 of our 11,000 employees and an annual budget of \$700 million.

As deputy administrator, I also manage agencywide initiatives. One of those initiatives is the Technology Modernization Fund Project Management Office (TMF PMO), which was established by the Modernizing Government Technology Act. The other initiative involves working on the proposed merger of the Office Personnel Management (OPM) and GSA. I also managed the startup of New Pay initiative: the governmentwide initiative to establish GSA as the single civilian payroll provider. Recently, this initiative was transferred over to the GSA Chief of Staff's office. Finally, managing GSA's coordination effort during presidential transition also falls under the deputy administrator's portfolio.



Can you tell us more about the Technology Modernization Fund Project Management Office?



I love this initiative. It is fabulous. I am very excited to be a part of it. It was authorized by the Modernizing Government Technology Act of 2017. Since that time, the fund has received \$100 million in FY 2018 and another \$25 million in FY 2019. We're waiting to see with crossed fingers that we're going to receive something in FY 2020.

I oversee the TMF's Project Management Office along with its executive director, Liz Cain. Suzette Kent, federal CIO, chairs the TMF Board. The board is made up of IT and acquisition experts across government. The process borrows from the TV show Shark Tank. Agencies come pitch different ideas to the board. The board does a very rigorous assessment process with key players involved in the proposed project. The fund is designed to provide resources for the IT modernization project that never seem to receive the proper funding. The TMF is a great way for these projects to get funding. It is important to underscore these are not grants, but loans that are expected to be paid back with savings from whatever it is that they are modernizing.

The funds are also dispersed in tranches. If an agency requests \$15 million, the board will allocate a set amount to, say, run a pilot or provide upfront monies. However, the next tranche of money isn't provided until progress is reported and results shown. As of this discussion, we have awarded seven projects totaling \$89 million. It is important to note that in July, the TMF PMO received three payments totaling about \$1.1 million. This is important for two reasons: first, getting repaid may assuage some of the initial doubt about that aspect of the TMF concept, and second, that repaid money can be used to support another TMF project.

Does GSA have any TMF funded projects?



GSA actually has two projects. We have the application modernization project that is helping us transition from legacy technologies to open source technologies. As of this discussion, that project just wrapped up its pilot phase. We have transformed two applications with a third one in production. The project identified best practices and techniques during the pilot stage that will benefit the team as they go into full implementation. We promised the TMF board that the team will put together a playbook that could be distributed to all federal agencies to assist other agencies in this area. The other GSA TMF project was the New Pay project. TMF is funding part of this project. This initiative is essential to GSA's goal of making back office operations



more efficient. This is a great example of a common repeatable transaction service that, as a government, we can and should do in a shared, centralized way.

In the early 2000s, the federal government launched the e-payroll initiative. Its focus was to streamline payroll processing governmentwide. At the time, there were 26 payroll systems. So, the initiative resulted in the consolidation of those 26 down to four designated payroll providers—GSA is one of those four. New Pay really is about finishing this work, trying to get the federal government to streamline even further, achieving a single payroll provider for the civilian side. So, right now, those four current payroll providers are stuck with some pretty old, costly systems, and they need to be repaired or replaced. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but very soon. We believe that through this migration to a single provider, we can realize some significant economies of scale. We can modernize to a software as a service model, which puts the risk and the cost off onto whoever is providing that software as a service and then improve the functionality and user experience of the payroll technology.

What is the GSA's Emerging Leaders Program?




ELP is a great program. It had kind of been put off to the side. I wanted to get this program back on track. We take newly graduated college students. We bring them into GSA for two years of training and rotations throughout the agency. After that time, these participants are then placed permanently in the agency. I had an amazing young woman from University of Wisconsin as my special assistant for two rotations. I would have hired her, but she decided to move to Chicago. She is still with the agency in the fleet department.


I have also had the opportunity to work with several other amazing ELPers through some of the programs that I manage. They are the future of GSA. Just so bright, hardworking, innovative. We have an incredibly high retention rate. It is 80 percent. I meet ELPers throughout the agency. Some of them are in their late 20s, early 30s—they all still talk about the program and the cohort that they formed. They still have lunches with leadership. Even though they are rotating around, we try to keep them as a cohort and build those relationships. It is just great, because they form relationships across the agency that, once they are finally placed, will help them be successful.

For instance, if you have somebody that does a rotation from the federal acquisition service to public building service, well, that is great. If they end up in one of those two services, they probably don't need to know what the other is doing. They feel valued because they know people throughout the agency and they can bring value to their organization.

What has surprised you most since becoming deputy administrator?

 Outside and perhaps within Washington, D.C., the GSA mission may be kind of a mystery. After taking the role, I started to get to know the mission and the people better. I was incredibly impressed, just blown away by the talent, the skill, the dedication, the motivation of GSA career employees. Just phenomenal! On the mission side, I was impressed by the business-like entrepreneurial atmosphere. All the innovation, the excitement about many different initiatives—how people's imaginations are rewarded. We want people to think outside the box.

What is a key characteristic an effective leader?

 It depends on context. Leadership in the military looks very different from leadership at a tech startup. For me, leadership starts with building a sense of trust. I am very much a team player. I have always viewed my role as leading from within the group as opposed to running ahead and asking everyone to follow me. I want my team to feel like we are all in it together. I try to create an environment that is a little more casual, friendly. I want people to feel safe to disagree with me and freely share their opinions. I may not listen, but I want them to tell me what they think. I have noticed that—one of my pet peeves—people in leadership positions that go around and talk about “I did this and I did

that.” It drives me crazy because we don't do anything by ourselves. In government, leaders must understand that it is a group effort. I try to make sure that my team knows that I recognize everything that they have done to get us across the finish line and that they know I appreciate all that they do.



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