

**Government  
Business  
Council**

# **THE 2020 CHALLENGE**

**Accelerating Federal Technology Transformations**

**AKIMA**

# INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 saw a sudden and rapid change in the way that federal agencies operate. The maximum telework policy adopted in March of 2020 forced agencies to re-envision mission-critical technology, moving quickly on several fronts to ensure security and implement creative solutions. In the eyes of federal technology experts, how has COVID accelerated or impeded new development? Has the pandemic changed the way that they, as thought leaders, approach technology transformation? How have these changes in both tools and thought processes shaped their agency's future trajectories?

To answer these questions and better understand the challenges facing federal IT leaders now and into the future, Government Business Council (GBC) conducted a qualitative research campaign bringing together perspectives of some of the top federal IT experts. Participating experts lead a variety of federal agencies, including the Veteran's Administration, the State Department, and the U.S. Air Force.

# THE EXPERTS



**Lauren Alexanderson**  
Deputy Chief Technology Officer  
*Health Department of Veteran's Affairs*



**Dr. Glen Johnson**  
Chief Technology Officer, Bureau of  
Information Resource Management  
*Department of State*



**Frank Konieczny**  
Former Chief Technology Officer  
(2020-2021),  
*United States Air Force*

# THE INTERVIEWS

**As an expert in your field, what do you consider to be some of the biggest challenges your agency has dealt with in 2020?**

**LA** LAUREN ALEXANDERSON

Some of our systems, such as our telehealth platform or even our own ability to work from home as staff, needed to rapidly scale from supporting maybe 10,000 video connect appointments a week, to [...] a 100% or 1000% increase. There's also the challenges of data quality and making sure that systems are talking to each other and sharing the right data. The last piece is understanding when there's a limit in what the technology can do, and when we really need to get people involved in designing the solutions for the moment.

**GJ** GLEN JOHNSON

The biggest problem we have is getting enough bandwidth worldwide, to do the kind of cloud connectivity required as more and more things move to the cloud. As more and more things are performed centrally, we have an ever expanding requirement for bandwidth. Pulling up a few webpages is a relatively low requirement, but if you start doing multiple video conferencing calls,

and then you add in high definition capabilities, as well as streaming video and online training, those are real bandwidth hogs.

**FK** FRANK KONIECZNY

Since everybody had to suddenly vacate the bases and work from home, we're trying to connect everybody. There's 160-some bases across the world. When COVID hit, the question was: how do you want to work? Some people had their own computers, and they took their laptops home with them. Others, a vast majority of them, did not have laptop computers they could take with them, and they had to either acquire those laptops from the government or use their own commercial laptops. We had people trying to communicate with each other on a mix of devices. We had to provide some capabilities with that. Another issue was: will the managers actually make sure that everybody works? That was the major one that we all had to face, because teleworking was not the norm. I think the managers have gotten past that phase now. They've seen everybody working hard, and I don't think there's an issue now with saying, "Oh, I [don't] have to be in the office to see your face anymore."

**Before the COVID-19 health crisis, what were some of the headline technology objectives for your organization?**

**FK FRANK KONIECZNY**

We've always tried to infuse technology into the organization, so transformation was going on. It was slow. We looked at zero trust capabilities. We started experimenting with Edge and other things, and looking at what we could do to improve the user environment, [including] the use of laptops and everything else associated with them. We had a plan in place to actually do things. The issue was that all of a sudden we were faced with having to instantaneously push this out there and get the technology moving to support what we want to do at a faster rate than we anticipated. So that was, I think, the biggest driver.

**GJ GLEN JOHNSON**

We had been moving aggressively into the cloud, well into the 90th percentile. We were largely done by the time the COVID hit. We had been working extensively, rethinking our mobility platforms, and segmenting it for people that just need top calendar contacts and email. We had fairly loose restrictions on personal devices, and we had engineered solutions where people who needed to be doing fairly sensitive things could also have platforms available to them that would be very tightly locked down. This gave us the security we needed while at the same time providing them the convenience of working in a mobile environment.

**LA LAUREN ALEXANDERSON**

While it's been a really rough year, VA made a lot of investments in setting some foundations and groundwork that were instrumental when this pandemic hit. One of our critical strategies with our digital transformation involved moving our teams to thinking not just about projects, but product development and end-to-end experience. We were really thinking about putting veterans first, prioritizing customer service, and bringing human-centered design into the products that we build. We've been focusing within the office of the CTO on establishing platforms that make it easy for other people to build new applications. VA.gov is established as a platform with a design system and identity strategy built in, and a full continuous development pipeline to be able to ship products quickly. This has made it easier for us to design quickly with our veterans, our clinical teams, our public affairs officers and everyone on the ground in the moment in mind, in order to ship things quickly to respond to our needs during the pandemic.

**Has the COVID-19 health crisis enabled or accelerated your agency's use of technology?**

**LA LAUREN ALEXANDERSON**

I would say it accelerated. From the video appointment side, we partner very closely with our office of connected care to deliver and ship digital health experiences. They had piloted the VA video connect system, with more folks who were

**“[COVID-19] actually allowed people to take more risk in technology transformation than they would have done normally.”**

- Frank Konieczny

starting to use it. All of a sudden, that needed to be the main way that we delivered care and mental health to our veterans. We are also using things like veteran partnerships with different companies to make sure that veterans who are in rural areas have an iPad to be able to connect, if they don't have a good system. We have a way of doing user research with veterans, so I can say: "I need to talk to 10 veterans who receive this specific benefit," and I can get in front of those veterans through our research mechanism very quickly. That allows us to pivot quickly and validate things quickly, to make sure that we're going in the right direction.

**GJ** GLEN JOHNSON

The technology was in place, but the adoption accelerated what we did by years. I think the biggest thing on the horizon is, for those of us who knew our jobs well, and knew the context and culture, moving to working from home wasn't that difficult. But I really felt sorry for the new people who were hired there over the last year, into empty buildings. Now, a completely new administration [has walked] through the doors to run these large agencies. How you accommodate that, and how we all get to know the new leadership, and the other things will be a very interesting exercise.

### **What has COVID-19 disabled or impeded?**

**FK** FRANK KONIECZNY

I think it was the opposite. It actually allowed people to take more risk in technology transformation than they would have done normally. We always said we have to maintain mission. How can we do it now? And how can we accelerate what we're currently doing to achieve that mission's goals? I think that pushed us very fast to take some risks with what we wanted to do. I think things would have happened, but it would've been much slower. All of a sudden, we're in a collaboration environment with Office 365 and Teams and things across all of DOD.

That would have not have happened for years from now, and now we're here.

**LA** LAUREN ALEXANDERSON

I think that there have been some initiatives that have moved to the back burner. Anything that we could leverage and use to respond to the COVID situation, we certainly have leaned on. Products or things that we may have been building that were not immediately in support of COVID may have moved down the priority list in order to make sure that we were making resources and other things available. One of the big things that the Office of the CTO works on is delivering an integrated experience for veterans where they connect with all of their healthcare and benefits in one place. So, while we had pivoted some of the team that was working on the healthcare side from trying to build some specific healthcare applications to really focusing on shipping COVID responses, I think that that has actually still worked in our favor because it has enabled us to get to veterans and reach veterans who may not have previously considered using digital tools as a way of interacting with their healthcare.

**GJ** GLEN JOHNSON

We've moved to the point where we do a lot of proof of concepts with other bureaus, with coordination weekly meetings, and that works fine. But at some point, you have to say: "Okay, we're going operational, and we need a team to do that." That's very, very difficult to do in a remote

environment. We're seeing some things that could probably be done in a day or two stretching up over several weeks. There's still things that would be more efficient if I had six of the right people in a room, and nobody leaves the room until it's done. In theory, you could probably do that online, but getting people to commit eight hours of an online session is something most people resist, myself being one of them.

**Do you think these shifts in technology use will be permanent within your agency, even after the crisis has passed?**

**FK** FRANK KONIECZNY

The biggest issue is always security. We took some risk in pushing things out there, and now how can we go back and make sure that we have a greater extent of security than what we initially pushed? That's what we're trying to do right now. I think that's going to be the norm -- how to keep the same capability but ensure the security of that capability.

**LA** LAUREN ALEXANDERSON

It's a little bit of "time will tell" still. Certainly I expect that use of video connect will stay pretty steady. I think that a lot of veterans who weren't considering that as an option for them, will do so now. We've heard a lot of positive feedback about things like that platform. There are some of the tools that we've built that I hope we do have to retire. I hope we don't have to always answer

a whole bunch of questions before we enter a facility, but I do think that we have set up a way to be able to do rapid screening for things like a flu clinic in the future. So, even if we retire the individual product itself, or the system or process that we've set up specifically for COVID, there will certainly be lessons learned that we can carry forward to the next challenge.

**GJ** GLEN JOHNSON

I think the consensus is that most people have been surprised how effective they have been, that the work gets done. I think some of this is permanent. In an organization like ours, which is a 24/7 organization, it's a workday somewhere for somebody always. We just assume that a percentage of our work will be done from home, and the infrastructure that we've put in place will stay in use, I'm sure. But I think one of the really interesting things that is going to emerge from this, [is] that we can have a different workforce that consists of people, who for whatever reason could not or would not want to live in the DC metropolitan area, but could be very effective employees anywhere in the country. It's not just the technology to work from home, it's the ability to expand the geographic availability of a potential workforce. If I can have people working around the country for me, I can greatly increase the potential workforce who can come work for me.

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**“It’s not just the technology to work from home, it’s the ability to expand the geographic availability of a potential workforce.”**

- Glen Johnson

**Of the security and mission-critical challenges that you have faced this year, what channels have presented themselves for solutions, partnerships, or collaborations?**

**LA** LAUREN ALEXANDERSON

There just have been loads of partnerships that we have and groups that we've worked with over the years to help with literally everything. We have also been partners, providing support to other agency teams who need help with things such as vaccinations. We have been working with Apple to provide some iPads to be able to help out with a rural health telehealth program. We did a number of partnerships around the flu vaccine this year and partnerships with groups to help us with masks. On the technology side, one of the tools we built [this year] was a chat bot. We were trying to help alleviate this flood of calls to contact centers with questions about COVID, and we were finding through our metrics that call-centers were

answering the same calls over and over and over again. So we partnered with Microsoft to pilot a self service tool and a chat bot.

**FK** FRANK KONIECZNY

It's much easier to actually talk with other agencies in the government, as well as within DOD. We've had a lot of success with communicating with other federal agencies, like Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice, and a few others now in the collaboration environment that we're in. Of course, we all love it now. It was very difficult to get out of that environment. Now, it's reaching the right people at the right time.

**Which of the challenges from this year, if any, do you think will continue to present themselves in 2021?**

**FK** FRANK KONIECZNY

Security is always a challenge. It's always out there, and COVID allowed a lot of potential malware to inject in. But that's prevented. It's going to take a while for everybody to get used to the cultural change that's happening -- the change is that I [only] see your face on your Zoom or your Teams session, and understanding that this is the way that we're going to see each other for right now.

**LA** LAUREN ALEXANDERSON

I don't want to say [we're] in reactive mode, but everyone is on their toes still. We've been in this constant state of alert. It's hard to be on 24/7 for that long. That is going to be a continuing challenge for us, being at the ready constantly and needing to shift something constantly. But we have invested in a lot of infrastructure and we'll continue to use our platforms and our processes to help us sustain that ready state as long as we need to.

**As a leader in your field, has your personal decision-making or thinking process changed as a result of the challenges this year?**

**GJ** GLEN JOHNSON

No. I'm happy, because I was an advocate for the last 10 years of making these changes, such as moving aggressively to the cloud and expanding our use of mobile platforms. We thought that we were building for a distant future. I wish we were smart enough to have predicted COVID-19 and say: "We'd be ready." But I think those of us that worked hard to make these migrations, to work through the security issues, I think we're feeling a little bit validated that we got it right. We did what we're supposed to do, and we were prepared. It's just surprising that it happened so quickly. And now, who doesn't know how to set up and participate in the video conferencing session from anywhere on multiple platforms? Nobody in the United States, nobody who's currently working is



**“... my personal view of healthcare and the role of technology in healthcare is that it’s our job to help people be engaged participants in their healthcare, and to make that as easy as possible for them.”**

- Lauren Alexanderson

in that category. It’s permanently in the basic skill sets of every human being now.

FK

FRANK KONIECZNY

No, I’m happy because I was pushing all this technology. I can say: “Yes. Took you long enough.” Finally people said “Hey, we actually have to have it.” For me, it’s been nice because it accelerated many of the things I’ve been trying to do for multiple years.

LA

LAUREN ALEXANDERSON

I think my personal view of healthcare and the role of technology in healthcare is that it’s our job to help people be engaged participants in their healthcare, and to make that as easy as possible for them. This year has really heightened for me just how important that is. Folks need to understand their risk. I think that we’re going to be in a place now where, when we’re moving beyond COVID, we are looking at people who had COVID and [now] have other health issues as a result. We can use things like our data analytics and health analytics platforms to surface insights to our providers, so that they can continue a dialogue and help our patients, and help our veterans understand that: “You had COVID and you were treated with these things, and as a result you may experience the other health issues. Here’s how you can be a proactive participant in your healthcare and engage your doctor early and often as you need to, to be able to manage that.”

**In your expert opinion, what is the “next big challenge” that your agency will see next year?**

GJ

GLEN JOHNSON

The stuff that I think is going to be big over the next year is robotic process automation. We’re seeing really rapid growth in that area.

We're dipping our toes into artificial intelligence machine learning. When you're looking at learning, you can make better decisions and exploit your data. Federally, they're swimming in data. The question is, how do you start making sense of it? What value do we have from our data? What do we learn from it? How can we run government more effectively, because we understand what our data is telling us? I think that's going to be a rapid area of growth. All of this requires more bandwidth than we currently have. So I think there's going to be a rush in providing much more bandwidth to accommodate these things.

**FK** FRANK KONIECZNY

I think they're going to have to figure out what transformations they want to control of the transformations that are occurring. As you progress, you have many people who want to do things. But then there's no real configuration control of what they're actually coming out with. We are going to have to impose some control and some budgetary concepts on top of what they're doing. A lot of people have great ideas, but then there's no sustainment tail for that great idea. I think the challenge is how we're going to choose from all the great ideas we have, and which ones we want to keep on going.

**LA** LAUREN ALEXANDERSON

I'm having trouble with taking my blinders off beyond COVID. It still feels very, very acute right now. There are still plenty of systems across the VA and tools that we're looking to modernize. We're working on continuing to shift an integrated experience within VA.gov, and working with the challenges of updating systems, making sure that there are APIs in place, such that we're able to really deliver on that promise. That will always be a challenge. I'm excited about continuing to work on that too, while pulling in all the things that we've learned and worked on in the past year.

# INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE

**The pace of IT innovation is increasingly exponentially.** The same technologies that seemed far-fetched a few years ago are now helping agencies and departments deliver on their mission objectives in a faster, smarter, and more secure manner. Akima is dedicated to delivering full spectrum IT solutions that help customers scale their efforts—all while reimagining how work gets done and redefining how citizens and federal employees are served. From direct access to thousands of IT products and comprehensive IT services management capabilities, to implementing cutting-edge technology solutions, our experienced teams stand ready to support you. Akima offers customers deep expertise and streamlined procurement solutions through a wide variety of best-in-class procurement vehicles, as well as the option of sole-source contracts through our portfolio of 8(a) companies.

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