

Artificial Intelligence Will Help Create a More Responsive Government

Stephen Goldsmith | January 12, 2017



When a citizen dials 311, it has been the longstanding preference by mayors to have a city employee on the other end of the line to deliver the ever-valuable personal touch.

But when efficiency is the priority, are we really best served by having city employees at 311 call centers act primarily as switchboard operators, sifting through online scripts or, worse, binders or spreadsheets and responding to information requests with specifically coded responses?

More often than not, citizens will call 311 with an information request — to determine their trash pick-up day, the hours the public pool is open or another simple ask. The North Carolina Innovation Center is now using chatbots for its internal IT help desk hotline, where between 80 and 90 percent of calls are for help changing a password.

Still in its experimental stage, North Carolina uses the bots to free up help center operators to handle more challenging and complex concerns. Instead of spending the majority of their time unlocking accounts and resetting passwords, the IT center workers can focus their efforts on more time-intensive service requests.

Given the recent private-sector advances with virtual assistants like Siri, Alexa and Cortana, as well as natural language use and cognitive learning, government should look to broaden the use of artificially intelligent assistants, particularly for the next generation of 311. The implementation of these artificially intelligent “assistants” should be more than an internal experiment; it should be targeted and complemented with deep contextual knowledge.

Because of enhancements in app-driven digital channels, it might be perceived that the Internet is the primary route citizens take to voice concerns to their city, but a 2015 report from the International City/County Management Association suggests that the telephone will remain the most popular citizen-government line of communication.

The next generation of 311 must make the phoning-in process more responsive. In most cities today an interactive voice response system screens and redirects calls to a live operator. Yet those voice response choices are relatively static, and even after fighting through them, the live operator who engages the citizen remains dependent on often dated and difficult-to-find scripts and with little real time for problem-solving.

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Call center operations should rely on chatbots to read the applicable documents, mine the relevant social media (e.g., spot a tweet from a frustrated parent that the swimming pool is not open as it should be) and turn the more difficult problem-solving over to engaged operators. Ironically, a bot will in fact bring forth efficient personalization, in multiple languages and with less frustration. Siri, can you help make my city hall operate better?

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