

GSA Innovates Services with Chief Customer Officer

Jason Shueh | April 1, 2015



The General Services Administration has appointed Phaedra Chrousos as its first chief customer officer, a title more familiar to the private sector than to government.

Chrousos is expected to embed customer-centric strategies into the GSA's daily operations. She comes from a background in startups, co-founding the online travel site the Daily Secret in 2011, and the health checkup booking platform HealthLeap, acquired by Vitals.com, in 2009.

Chrousos started at GSA in June 2014 and has sought to harmonize the federal agency's diverse customer initiatives — such as procurement, its 18F IT projects and public building services. Her presence at the GSA is also representative of a turnabout in culture reform. The agency has been working to refurbish its image following an excessive [spending scandal](#) in April 2012 that led to management dismissals and the resignation of former GSA head Administrator Martha Johnson.

Chrousos said the idea for a CCO came from GSA Administrator Dan Tangherlini, who wanted the role to be part of a broader operational overhaul.

“He came up with the idea,” Chrousos said. “As you know, he came into GSA after a scandal and he helped turn the agency around, helped make it more efficient, and then wanted to focus on swinging the pendulum in the direction of customer service as one of our core missions.”

The concept of “customer service” extends far beyond courtesies and typical generalities of “customer-friendly service.” Chrousos said it is really about using customer insights to craft operational strategies, services and policies. This is one of the reasons her four-person team collaborates closely with leadership to serve its many customer groups. To gather this kind of intelligence often means conducting interviews and surveys, collecting customer interaction data and holding focus groups — all metrics to benchmark progress and identify opportunities for future projects.

Roughly five months were spent mapping the GSA customer experience end to end, instituting reporting processes and summarizing customer demand. Projects that developed from the research included a [Yelp-like rating system](#) for government contractors, call center consolidations and a new 311 platform — a Web and mobile app that allows government tenants to report non-emergency requests.

“When we came in, one of the first things we noticed was that we were working off a lot of anecdotal data and disparate data sets, so the customer team really brings that all together to create a clear picture for the GSA business team ... that helps shape everyday business decisions,” said Chrousos.

The work has paid off in customer satisfaction and efficiencies, but also in cost savings. Chrousos’s team found by consolidating survey tools, CRM software and call centers, it could save money while simultaneously improving service.

CCOs Impact Organizations

The GSA’s benefits may be indicative of why tech companies — the most common adopters of CCOs — have such a position. A 2014 study by the Chief Customer Officer Council (CCOC), reported that 10 percent of Fortune 500 and 22 percent of Fortune 100 companies utilized the role. Such statistics herald a sizable change for the position that was previously considered questionable, either leading to career stagnation or retirement. Now, CCOs show upward mobility and it is not uncommon for CCOs to become a chief operating officer or even CEOs.

Jay Newman, a director of strategy at Jump Associates, a consulting firm that works with government clients like the GSA and Fortune 500 companies, said the position’s future prominence in government could be pushed by a number of factors. First, there’s the private-sector consumer experience pushing demand. Proliferation of alternative private-sector service choices is another factor. And then there is a burst of transformative leaders who see value in making mission statements about citizen customers.

”I think that the ‘ask’ of an agency leader to become more customer-centered is a really purposeful one right now,” Newman said. “And the reason that it is becoming an ‘ask’ is

because — much like in the private sector — government agencies are being called to drive innovation amid an increasing number of competitive and technology pressures.” To make it all work, the CCO job description requires specificity, a formula that entails duties and objectives, but also commitments that an organization must make to transform itself to support customer innovation. Without these staples the CCOC study said the position can become “volatile” as CCOs struggle to perform tasks and leadership challenges for strong ROI.

“What we’ve basically seen over quite a few years working with leadership teams who are working to embed or create customer-centric approaches is that the organization actually needs to transform themselves to some degree,” Newman said.

There are four essentials to becoming a more customer-centric organization, according to Newman. First, the organization must put customer service within its tangible operational goals. Second, it needs an assisting technology — such as an app or Web platform — to communicate and dialog initiatives. Third, the organization must establish processes for reporting within normal workflows. Finally, leadership must be invested in the position’s endeavors and outcomes.

“The most important thing that a leader should be thinking about is what will be the mandate of the particular office, what will be its purpose in the world of the agency: that contains the why, value reasoning behind customer service, as well as direction on specific improvement areas,” Newman said.

Examples of other customer-based titles in government include city 311 initiatives. Philadelphia’s Chief Customer Service Officer Rosetta Lue, launched in February a new [311 platform](#) for the city in partnership with Salesforce. The project improves customer response times, lays groundwork for data analytics and is deeply connected to Philadelphia’s [citizen service strategy](#).

Next Steps

Energized by initial successes, the GSA plans to publish a CCO playbook documenting thinking, decisions and processes in the undertaking. Already, fellow federal agencies have reached out on best practices and the GSA intends to deliver process templates, bench marking notes, its job description and other helpful hints at fashioning the role.

“I think we’re pretty close to proving this hypothesis and once we get a little further down the road, we’d like to take what we’ve learned and scale it across government,” Chrousos said. “There is no reason why agencies need to reinvent the wheel.”

The GSA is currently wrestling with customer-centric strategies for procurement. As many in government know, federal procurement regulations can be trying at best, and Chrousos said she’s engaging with contractors and businesses for feedback. Technology will be the likely answer for customer improvements, though what kind and in what way is still unclear.

“These are [procurement] experiences that haven’t changed very much over the years,” Chrousos said. “So there is a huge opportunity to streamline and modernize them with tech.”

<http://www.govtech.com/pcio/articles/GSA-Innovates-Services-with-Chief-Customer-Officer.html>