



8 Tips for Successful Technology Modernizations

Modernization can help leaders retain talent and improve services to vulnerable youth. The following tips give leaders a framework for making the best technology choices for their agencies.

1. Start with people. You'll need to gain buy-in from government executives, elected officials and caseworkers. Leaders respond to the usual incentives: higher productivity and better experiences for the voting public. Users respond best when they can participate in the choice of technologies and receive thorough training and timely support.

The most transformative tools focus on human-centered design. Well-designed user interfaces anticipate how people interact with software and provide intuitive workflows for their everyday challenges. Since most people take their phones with them everywhere, mobile solutions will drive the most value for child welfare managers.

"We've got to consider the impact of our solutions on the end users themselves," Mathieu says.

2. Uphold your policies and processes. The move to human-centered design means you don't have to mold your policies and processes to suit the requirements of software. Instead, software should adapt to your agency's requirements.

3. Establish priorities. Technology providers try to cast a wide net, offering far more features than your system might need. Choose tools that drive the most value for your child welfare system within your budget. You'll also want to choose services that align with funding sources, like grants for technology upgrades.

4. Create user portals. Give every stakeholder a common location to access critical data. While the interface for a portal is standardized, workflows within the portal can be customized for specific activities like preparing data for court or adding new clients to the system. You may have different portals for external and internal users, but each can have a similar layout and user interface.

5. Build in stages. You'll feel tempted to do a rip-and-replace upgrade. This isn't always practical. You may have technologies with years of useful life left. Budget limitations may limit your options. These realities make it more sensible to do a "wraparound" transformation that merges the newest technologies with legacy systems that are too costly or complicated to replace.

Many agencies start with a few pilot projects, work out the kinks and iterate based on user feedback. This approach reinforces a people-first strategy and encourages adoption because users can see their suggestions generating results.

6. Automate manual processes. Manual data entry presents many automation opportunities. Start by analyzing workflows and identifying manual processes that digital tools can replicate. For instance, you may be able to create standard data-input forms with user guides to walk people through processes and maintain compliance.

Low-code software makes it much easier to automate processes. These platforms do not require advanced programming expertise, meaning agency staff can spin up new solutions based on their own changing needs.

7. Integrate data sources. "It's critical for agencies working in the child welfare field to be able to share data across county systems," Kelly says. Sharing can extend to multiple systems, like public health and criminal justice, and multiple software platforms. Well-designed software makes it easy to fetch data from multiple sources and present it in standard formats.

8. Keep an eye on the future. Cloud providers have a strong incentive to keep their solutions secure and responsive to competitive challenges. If you buy a commercial, off-the-shelf solution, you could get stuck with out-of-date technology.