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Hi everybody. My name is Matt Cutts, and I worked at Google for almost 17 years. As a distinguished engineer there, I was pretty close to the top of the Silicon Valley ecosystem.

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Then I decided to follow some inspiring folks and do a short tour at the US Digital Service. That's the group of geeks that helped rescue HealthCare.gov when that website went down hard in 2013. Yeah. So I signed up for a three-to-six-month tour, and almost three years later, I'm still in Washington DC, working for the federal government, because the government really needs technologists right now.

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At my old job, every room had videoconferencing integrated with calendars, power cables were built right into the furniture. When I moved to a government agency, I had to call a person to set up a phone conference. And when we moved to a new office, we didn't have furniture for a while, so we set up the phone on a trash can.

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One of the things that surprised me, whenever I moved to DC, is how much the government still has to deal with paper. This is a facility in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where people were worried that the building might be structurally unsound from the weight of all that paper. Yeah.

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Paper has some downsides. Here's a pop quiz: If your last name starts with H or higher, H or higher, would you raise your hand? Wow. I have some bad news: Your veteran records might have been destroyed in a fire in 1973.

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(Laughter)

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Yeah. Paper processes are also slower and more prone to errors. If you're a veteran and you're applying for your health benefits using a paper form, you might have to wait months for that

form to be processed. We replaced that with a web form, and now most veterans find out if they can get access to their health benefits in 10 minutes.

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(Applause)

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Here's another launch that I'm proud of. We worked with the Small Business Administration to move one of their systems from paper to digital. So this is a picture from before, and this is afterwards. Same cubicles, same people, just a better system for everyone.

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At one point, we wanted to celebrate modernizing a different system, and so we went to a local grocery store and we said, "Can you make a cake and decorate it with the form that we've digitized?" And the grocery store got really weirded out by that request. They wanted a letter on official government letterhead. Well, we work for the government, so we wrote a letter that said, "You can use this public-domain form on a cake for celebratory purposes."

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(Laughter)

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Which led to bad jokes about filling forms out in triplicake. Yes, dad jokes in government.

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Now I've talked a lot about paper, but we also bring up computer systems that go down. We bring in modern technology practices, like user-centered design and the cloud, and we also help improve procurement. It turns out government buys software the same way that it buys chairs and brownies and tanks: from government regulations that are over 1,000 pages long. So yes, there's some stuff that's messed up in government right now. But if you think Silicon Valley is the savior in this story,

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(Laughs)

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you've got another thing coming. Some of the best and brightest minds in technology are working on meal-delivery start-ups and scooters and how to deliver weed to people better. Is that really the most important thing to work on right now? Silicon Valley likes to talk about making the world a better place. But you feel your impact in a much more visceral way in government.

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This is somebody whose dad passed away. He hunted me down on Twitter to say that a system that we had improved worked well for him during a tough time. Those tough times are when government needs to work well and why we need innovation in government.

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Now I have a confession to make. When I came to DC, I sometimes used words like bureaucrat. These days, I'm much more likely to use words like civil servant. Like Francine, who can make you cry. Or at least, she made me cry, because she's so inspiring. I am also deeply, fiercely proud of my colleagues. They will work through illogical situations and put in late nights to get to the right result. The government can't pay huge salary bonuses, so we ended up making our own awards. Our mascot is a crab named Molly. And so that award is actually a crab-shaped purse, screwed into sheet metal.

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These days, I believe less in silver bullets that are going to fix everything. I believe more in the people who show up to help. If you're looking for something deeply meaningful -- and full disclosure, sometimes incredibly frustrating -- here's what you need to know. There is something difficult and messy and vital and magical happening when civil servants partner with technologists at the city and state and national level. You don't have to do it forever. But you can make a difference in public service right now.

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Thank you.

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(Applause)