



Written by [Veronika Kyrylenko](#) on January 21, 2025

# From Manhattan Project to IT Upgrade: DOGE and the Federal Overhaul That Wasn't

Billed as the ultimate solution to federal inefficiency, the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) was proclaimed with promises as bold as they were grandiose. From President Donald Trump's campaign trail rhetoric to Elon Musk's \$2 trillion cost-cutting pledge, DOGE was supposed to herald a new era of smaller government and fiscal discipline.

Yet, as the ink dried on the executive order establishing DOGE — now USDS, which stands for the U.S. Department of Government Efficiency Service — those ambitious promises seem to have evaporated. What was once [described](#) as a Manhattan Project-level initiative has been rebranded into a modernization effort focused on improving government software and IT systems. Saving targets? Don't bother looking.



AP Images  
Elon Musk

## The Order

President Donald Trump signed an [executive order](#) to establish the United States DOGE Service (USDS), one of more than two dozen executive actions taken on his first day back in office.

Strikingly, the executive order entirely skips over Trump's campaign [promise](#) of a "complete financial and performance audit of the entire federal government and making recommendations for drastic reforms." Instead, it presents "the President's DOGE Agenda" as a much more modest undertaking, centered on "modernizing Federal technology and software to maximize governmental efficiency and productivity." While streamlining software is certainly useful, it's hardly the revolutionary, government-wide overhaul that was championed on the campaign trail.

Further, while Trump initially [presented](#) DOGE after his November victory as an outside advisory task force of transformative magnitude, it has ultimately turned out to be little more than a rebranded United States Digital Service (USDS) — ironically, the same acronym, just with a shinier collar. Created under President Barack Obama in 2014, [the USDS](#) was designed to address government IT failures and improve digital services by bringing in private-sector expertise.

## Provisions

The executive order establishes the following key components of the USDS.

## Rebranding and Structure



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The executive order rebrands the United States Digital Service (USDS) as the United States DOGE Service (also USDS). The order leaves it within the Executive Office of the President. It also establishes a temporary team, the U.S. DOGE Service Temporary Organization, led by the USDS administrator under the White House Chief of Staff's oversight. This team has an 18-month mandate to modernize federal technology and streamline operations. Set to conclude on July 4, 2026, its closure won't affect the ongoing operations of the broader program.

### **DOGE Teams**

President Trump directs every government agency to set up a small "DOGE Team" within 30 days. These teams will have at least four members, including experts such as an engineer, a human resources specialist, and an attorney. The team will be led by a DOGE team lead, who will work closely with the central DOGE office to make sure the agency is following the president's plan for modernizing technology and improving efficiency.

The agency heads will choose who joins their DOGE team, but they'll need to consult with the central DOGE office before finalizing the team. The DOGE team lead will also help guide the agency's leadership on how to carry out the modernization goals.

### **Software Modernization Initiative**

Trump directed the USDS administrator to lead a Software Modernization Initiative to improve how government software, IT systems, and networks function across all agencies. This effort focuses on making different agency systems work together more smoothly, ensuring the accuracy of government data, and responsibly managing data collection and sharing.

Agency leaders are required to help with this process by giving the USDS full access to their unclassified records, software, and IT systems, as long as it complies with the law. The USDS must follow strict data protection standards to keep sensitive information secure.

The order also overrides any previous rules or directives that could prevent the USDS from accessing the necessary resources to carry out its modernization efforts.

### **General Provisions**

Finally, the order doesn't change the legal authority of any government agency, its leaders, or the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) role in managing budgets and policies. The order specifies that officials will implement it in line with existing laws and only if funding is available. Finally, the order makes clear that it creates no new legal rights. It also denies individuals the ability to sue the government based on its provisions.

### **USDS Role in Federal Hiring**

On the campaign trail and shortly after, DOGE was heralded as the solution to government bloat. The leaders promised slashing the workforce and even eliminating [entire agencies](#). However, its actual role in hiring tells a different story. The [executive order](#) titled "Reforming the Federal Hiring Process and Restoring Merit to Government Service" assigns DOGE a more modest task. Instead of wielding the axe, the president directed DOGE to create a Federal Hiring Plan. This plan aims to "[bring] to the Federal workforce only highly skilled Americans dedicated to the furtherance of American ideals, values, and



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interests.”

Evidently, DOGE has moved far from the dramatic layoffs promised during the campaign. It now focuses on advising on hiring practices. Officials work with agency heads to improve the quality of new hires. This shift doesn't match the initial rhetoric. Still, it positions DOGE as a key player in reshaping the federal workforce — though more in appearance than substance.

The promise to cut the federal workforce has shifted to fine-tuning hiring policies. Time will show if this adjustment is a practical strategy or a retreat from bold ambitions.

### **What Waste-cutting?**

Both Musk and his then-prospective co-chair of DOGE, Vivek Ramaswami, declared the entity as the ultimate cost-saving initiative. They aimed to tackle the “wasteful expenditures” plaguing the federal budget. Musk set the tone during the 2024 campaign with a bold promise to slash federal spending by [\\$2 trillion](#). This staggering figure exceeded the entire discretionary budget for 2023. It became a rallying cry for fiscal reform and a bold symbol of the administration's vision to rein in government excess.

However, that lofty promise quickly collided with the harsh realities of federal budgeting. In a recent [interview](#) with political strategist Mark Penn, Musk admitted the \$2 trillion target was more aspirational than realistic. He suggested the cuts might achieve \$1 trillion instead — an outcome he still called “epic.”

Yet, even these scaled-back ambitions failed to make it into the executive orders establishing USDS. The orders contain no mention of fiscal targets or sweeping cost reductions. Instead, the focus has shifted entirely to modernizing federal technology and improving operational efficiency. While these goals may be worthwhile in terms of cutting costs, they lack the seismic fiscal impact that once defined the initiative's promise.

### **Big Tech's Quiet Opportunity**

What began as a grand vision for governance and financial reform now feels more like a bureaucratic exercise in incremental improvements. At the same time, its current focus on modernizing federal technology could inadvertently benefit President Trump's prominent tech-industry supporters. Those include Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, Tim Cook, and Sundar Pichai. Modernizing government infrastructure will likely require major contracts for cloud services, artificial intelligence, and cybersecurity. Amazon, Meta, Apple, and Google dominate all those areas.

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