You know that moment just before you solve a Rubik’s Cube? One minute the solution seems insurmountable, the next effortless. I’ll admit, I’ve never conquered the famed 3D puzzle, but you get the metaphor. Well, that’s how I view where industry is at with ATC modernization. And if you thought the conversation at last month’s ATCA Annual was more of the same, then you weren’t listening.

It’s time to stop assuming that one be-all and end-all solution to ATC modernization will suffice. Real progress and innovation won’t happen until we as an industry break free of the confines of Pandora’s box. That theme was reinforced repeatedly at the Aireon Arena’s concluding free education session, “Blue Skies: Modernizing the NAS, Regardless of Privatization.” It sought to answer what’s next after NextGen.

Moderator Gene Hayman of CACI agreed: “I think the conversation is starting to evolve – it’s becoming more and more focused. There’s more than one solution, and I believe we need to focus on a collective set of solutions through two lenses: what does it look like with and without privatization?”

Natesh Manikoth of the FAA insisted the agency has been thinking and working towards a post-NextGen NAS. He suggests that NAS Horizons might be a vehicle to get us there. The Interagency Planning Office (IPO)-led project has partnered with NASA and begun defining what is beyond NextGen by brainstorming concepts, technologies, and strategies for 2045 and later.

Chris Metts of Harris Corporation agreed that NAS Horizons has the potential of becoming that innovative approach, but felt that having that crucial dialogue (that occurs in so many sessions...
at ATCA Annual) is a major step towards ending our industry’s “temporary stagnation.”

“It’s not just up to government – industry needs to assume some leadership in it too,” Metts added.

Michael Dyment of NEXA Capital Partners, LLC agreed: “We really need to find a new way of doing business. A more agile regulator is what [the panel] is suggesting; otherwise, we’ll lose the industry. I think this industry needs to take some leadership, and we’re not seeing that.”

Dyment and Metts think the answer lies with a greater reliance on public-private partnerships (PPP). Both were impressed with the FAA’s Pat McNall’s thoughts in the PPP breakout session on Oct. 17. “It’s opening that mindset to say there isn’t just one particular model,” said Metts.

Manikoth believed an increased sharing of data, which many felt is the lynchpin of ATC modernization, is a cultural change (who doesn’t know someone at work who refuses to share responsibilities?). “Deep collaboration will benefit the whole industry. The industry could do a lot more on its own.”

The panel suggested it’s not too early to examine lessons learned from NextGen, even while it’s still being implemented. “It’s the end of a phase, not the end of NextGen,” said panelist Gerald Dillingham of the US Government Accountability Office (GAO), who’s been analyzing ATC modernization for as long as he can remember. “We should take lessons from this NextGen experience.”

“I’m pleased to report that there’s a light at the end of the tunnel. Benefits [like time savings] are now being derived for major players’ passengers,” he continued.

This new way of thinking – for our industry, at least – extends to UAS traffic management (UTM). UAS have been a major driver of innovation for our industry, which over time, will influence and help inform our change of mindset. One could argue that these types of conversations at ATCA Annual confirm it’s already happening.

“Five years from now at ATCA Annual, half the companies will be promoting their UTM solutions,” predicted Dyment. “There are dozens of concepts of operations floating around for UTM.”

So, what’s the answer for the future of the NAS? We still aren’t quite sure but I promise we’re getting there.

“There’s more than one solution, and I believe we need to focus on a collective set of solutions through two lenses: what does it look like with and without privatization?”

– Gene Hayman, CACI