



Case study



Bringing commercial skills and mindsets to a public service organization to improve public services and reduce costs

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10% of all planning applications will be submitted through electronic channels by end 2005 60% by end 2008 and 90% by end 2011 (to be measured by statistics on channel usage)

Background

The Planning Portal is a key initiative in Transformational Government.

The need to improve provision of housing and especially, affordable housing placed extra strains on already struggling Local Planning Authorities. Substantial benefits had been identified as a result of the Pendleton report and the Planning Portal team were facing tough targets.

A victim of their own success, the best of the original team had been hand-picked to lead new t-government projects and the newly promoted team had little time to adjust to their new roles as new and even stiffer challenges arrived on their desks.

The new director, wisely decided that the time had arrived to formalise the key methods they had been using so successfully into a standard set of processes and document templates and to introduce more commercially driven approaches to engaging with stakeholders and attracting new users.

"The templates alone have saved me hours of work and give us a standard terms of reference when discussing products, it is a great benefit"

Aled Herbert – Product Manager

The project was undertaken in two stages, Initially I worked with the team to identify barriers to take-up and to identify the strengths and weaknesses in the existing team and strategy so that we could begin to plan the way forward.

Having carried out substantial consultation and recognised many of the issues needing to be addressed, we then examined the weaknesses that allowed these issues to go either unnoticed, or unattended.

We examined existing decision processes, team make-up and methodology involving the entire team from director level to support desk in identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

The conclusions

The conclusions were simple and not all that revolutionary once out on the table. Insufficient engagement of real end-user as opposed to high level stakeholders meant that the value delivered by the services was not always what had been planned. The reasons many people liked the services were often not the reasons expected and too many of the messages aimed at encouraging uptake, were falling on stony ground.

Problems that were easily fixed remained major barriers to success because nobody

had thus far been aware of them.

Standard business analysis methods had failed to solve the real problems. Traditional Project management had lost it's value at launch day and had missed a few critical steps before that. Only the calibre of the individuals had instinctively overcome some of these barriers to achieve considerable successes and realise considerable benefits.

The solution

The team were adamant that they didn't want to be "given a fish", they were also keen that the entire project be completed in just five months.

I worked along with an associate from a silicon valley background to customise a product management methodology based on well proven document templates and sound rationale, but built around familiar documents and ideas.

The process element in particular was geared towards the strengths and weaknesses of the team ensuring buy-in. The team were then supported and coached through one project using the new methodology.

Perhaps the most valuable element of the new process is that it focuses on solving the customer's problems through support staff that go out there and help customers with the changes, while constantly feeding back to the product team.

Business Analysis even when done well and consistently, is simply not sufficiently robust to understand the problems and motivations of a nationwide audience who will only use your product if it is able to demonstrably help them or solve a problem in some way and do it at least as well as the competition.

It isn't just government bodies that make this error, plenty of technology organisations rely on hunches to create products that they hope will sell and they then go looking for convincing arguments why people should buy it.

When your children's inheritance or the taxpayer's pounds and pence are at stake, it simply isn't good enough to play roulette with your investment.

The first and most important aspect of making any product successful is adapting a customer focused (citizen centric) approach. "I want it to happen, you should be doing it", just won't convince or motivate anyone.

Project Management is far too often about making it happen against the odds. Project managers are often blinded to clear messages telling them that this project should not be continuing because among other things, their job might be under threat. Programme offices too are geared towards the "waterfall" approach to projects that makes decisions and then barges forward with blinkers on. Government is often seen to be about legislating. This has traditionally been seen as the scope of the job. If the legislation doesn't fix things then legislate again.

The concept of encouraging citizens to do things by making it attractive to them still may be an alien one in some quarters, but it is in fact a cornerstone of democracy and just about as right and proper and as guaranteed to succeed as it is possible to imagine.

Building and launching successful products, and that is what most government websites are, must be a more intuitive, communicative, iterative process willing to try cheaply, quickly abort when it is not working, chop and change and adjust midstream and to regularly admit defeat and cut it's losses moving on to something that works until a formula is found that meets with approval of the citizens.

Because of the sheer size of Public services and the level of responsibility borne by public servants from relatively early in their careers, there is a strong reliance on process and procedure to see them through. Paperwork is important and decisions need to be collective, documented and evidence based. Intuition is less valued.

Failure when it is perceived can attract unfair attention and thus stifles initiative and risk taking.

The methodology that supports successful product development, launch and long term management to deliver benefits, is therefore a process that provides all the required evidence and documentation, encourages regular gateway reviews and withdrawals from projects, recognises the successes and views the early withdrawals as money saved and as success also. The UK public sector still has far too many websites and especially sites that are not highly valued or worse still are badly needed, but falling short of the mark.

In an interview for Government Computing Magazine August 2008, uptake of e-planning was declared by Chris Kendal director of the planning portal to have reached 98% and won the efficiency prize in this year's GC Awards for Innovation based on an estimated £200 million pounds in savings. "Of the sales team he says, **They would bring these concerns back to the centre and say, this is what needs to happen if it is to be successful**" This helped ensure the project's success.

NV8™ holds answers to many of the issues faced by public service websites.

Ed Taaffe