HOW INDIANAPOLIS TRANSFORMED GOVERNMENT SERVICE

To build an outstanding digital presence, officials in Indianapolis-Marion County first had to view the world through their customers' eyes.

Many governments decide now and then to refresh their websites. But when Joe Hogsett took office as mayor of Indianapolis in 2016, Chief Information Officer Ken Clark and the Information Services Agency (ISA) came to him with a more ambitious vision.

"We had a great opportunity to rethink how we do digital services," says Abbey Brands, ISA's chief communications officer.

Hogsett agreed, giving the green light to Shift Indy, an initiative that has transformed the way people do business with the city-county government. Today, the relaunched Indy.gov gives citizens a fast and easy way to find the services they need, apply for benefits and conduct transactions.

Shift Indy succeeded because officials put citizens at the center of their decisions. The project also reached its goals thanks to close collaboration between ISA and its partners — the city-county government's departments and agencies, vendors that provide back-office systems and the primary partner on Shift Indy, Chicago-based CityBase.

A SHIFT IN PERSPECTIVE

The previous city of Indianapolis and Marion County (Indy) website was not an effective tool for delivering citizen services. That's because it was designed to serve the purposes of the city-county government's 40-plus departments and agencies, not the needs of Indy residents.

Behind the original Indy.gov home page, each entity maintained a site with its own look and methods to engage the public.

"Some pages had multiple colors; some had multiple fonts," says Brands. "Some used very intense legal language; others used simple language."

The sites were also hard to navigate. "A lot of pages were nested within other pages," Brands explains. That left visitors clicking through numerous layers. When government entities posted information, they often used a PDF format, and they gave little thought to how the site was organized. As a result, search engines were largely ineffective.

When search didn't work, the only alternative was a trial-and-error journey through individual pages, says Brands. "If you don't know a lot about local government, if you don't know that the auditor does the homestead deduction or the treasurer collects property tax bills, that can be difficult."

Clark and officials at ISA decided they would not simply correct the obvious problems. Instead, they decided to help agencies and departments re-imagine how to use technology to deliver services, viewing every function through a citizen's eyes.

CREATING A DIGITAL CITY HALL

Clark and his team started gaining buy-in from each department and agency. They collected more than 1,000 user stories, plus another 100 or so from partners in the community. User stories define an action that a person needs to take to achieve a certain outcome, like finding a polling place to vote. The innovation of Shift Indy was to provide more than information about these city-county services. Wherever possible, residents and businesses could complete the entire process online, including searches, registrations and payments.

Not every department or agency came on board immediately.

"A lot of people felt they were leaving their specific brand by moving into a unified effort," says Brands.

But enthusiasm grew as ISA demonstrated how new processes would improve service, while also making internal operations more efficient.

"Being a partner, meeting with every single agency, documenting their processes and seeing where they could leverage technology was helpful," says Brands.

With branding unique to Indy, the CityBase platform introduced an easy, consistent user experience across the entire site. CityBase and ISA worked with agency partners to replace manual processes with new, digital versions, and to improve existing digital services.

To connect these customer-facing services with Indy's back-end information systems, ISA asked its third-party vendors for application programming interfaces (APIs).

"In some cases, vendors were ready to go; they had APIs built," Brands says. "In other cases, we had to work alongside them to get APIs built and tested."

One of the first digital services to arise from Shift Indy was a transaction to obtain a homestead deduction on a resident's property taxes. Applicants used to submit paper forms and then wait up to 10 business days to find out if their deductions were approved.

"Now, we've seen it take as little as 20 minutes from the time a digital form is submitted to the time it's approved," says Brands.

REVAMPING THE CONTENT

Another focus of Shift Indy was to streamline and rationalize website content. The previous Indy.gov included roughly 8,000 pages, and for a decade, editors had carte blanche access. Content ranged from vital information such as court schedules to nice-to-know items such as facts on local bird species. There were no firm guidelines to regulate which information to provide, or how to present it. One of the reasons ISA selected CityBase was its approach to information design. The platform organizes content into small units or "activities," to allow many ways of finding the same piece of information.

To start the renovation, Brands created a spreadsheet for each department or agency, mapping the content that entity controlled. Partners examined each item in the map, deciding whether to keep it or drop it.

"The idea was to put the ownership on our partners, to say, 'This is your site. This is how you want to present yourselves," Brands says.

She stayed in continual contact with all the partners, encouraging them to deliver their responses on schedule.

In the next phase, Brands and two content experts from CityBase removed redundant material, grouped related items, and revised content for style and consistency. Almost 60 percent of the ancillary content was removed throughout the transition. A new editorial style guide helped keep writers and editors in the same voice, and ensured content was written at a seventh-grade reading level to make information accessible for all audiences.

CityBase launched its content management system (CMS) with Indy as the beta users. The CMS allows experts in each department or agency to update content themselves. The system ensures they use the correct fonts, headings and other design features to keep the look and feel of Indy.gov consistent.

AWARD-WINNING RESULTS

Indianapolis-Marion County first piloted the new site at My.Indy.gov in 2017. Its success won ISA the Corporate Innovator of the Year award in 2018 from TechPoint, an organization that promotes technology growth in Indiana.

Today, Indy.gov offers 60 digital services, presenting transactions and information in an intuitive format that is easy to use on a computer or a mobile device. Features that make services easier to use include the ability to validate a person's information as they enter it against a database, and forms with conditional logic that only show people questions relevant to them. The user-friendly portal encourages citizen engagement and increases government transparency.

"The old site didn't serve citizens," says Brands. The new one does. "You can type in exactly what you want on the front page, find what you need, complete it and be on your way."

INDY'S KEYS TO SUCCESS

Brands shares the following best practices to build a citizen-centric digital presence:

✓ **Remember you're not an island.** Study the successful work of other municipalities. Brands and her team particularly like Boston.gov.

✓ **Start working on content early.** Don't focus so much on improving digital services that you forget about text-based content. That information is vital, and re-doing it takes effort.

✓ **Be thorough when you make the transition to the new site.** Incrementally remove all traces of the old site to avoid confusing users.

✓ **Educate end users within government about what the new site can do.** Don't stop with top agency executives: get the word out to the entire staff. "If you come to the city-county building in Indianapolis today, you see decals about Indy.gov in elevators and on revolving doors," says Brands. "We have it plastered everywhere."

✓ **Use every tool at your disposal to educate the public.** "We got a lot of our agencies and partners to share this on social media," says Brands. The messages not only promote the new site, but also suggest transactions citizens can complete there. "Using as many channels as you can to get the message across is incredibly important."

This piece was developed and written by the Government Technology Content Studio, with information and input from CityBase.

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