Success Story

Dynamic Learning Platform: ICF's Agile Approach to Learning

This flexible solution is helping transform how the U.S. Government delivers services to citizens and businesses and leverages an Agile approach for complex digital training needs
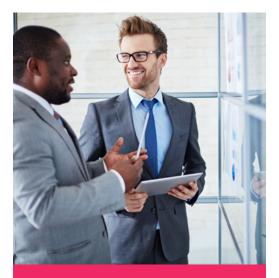
The Challenge

The initial challenges with the launch of healthcare.gov spotlighted the need for changes in federal procurement practices that, at the time, did not provide the flexibility required for implementing modern digital service solutions. U.S. government agencies had a compelling need to find new ways to train their workforces to keep pace with both technological change and increasing demand from citizens for federal digital services. Within the acquisition world, acquisition professionals need to develop a solid understanding of modern technology and services that can be used to meet citizen needs.

What's more, federal procurement practices further complicated this challenging situation. Contracting officer's warrants come tethered with strict personal accountability and responsibility, thus making some reluctant to attempt creative and innovative practices needed to effectively procure the most modern digital services. Even those contracting officers willing to innovate may experience resistance within their organizations, making it difficult to equip staff with the knowledge and skills needed to act as trusted business advisors and serve as catalysts for change within organizations that are not set up to embrace change and new opportunity.

The ICF Solution

In addressing the U.S. government's significant challenges, ICF developed a new learning approach with the U.S. Digital Service (USDS), offering a departure from the traditional instructional design approach by using a dynamic method that blends the typically segmented, step-wise design and delivery phases. The Dynamic Learning Platform uses an iterative approach in which instructional designers write subsequent sections of learning content while delivering earlier sections, ensuring the training rapidly and effectively meets evolving learner needs. A rigorous assessment process and learner analytics drive the design of engaging and interactive learning experiences that are dynamic and adapt to the range of participant abilities and knowledge.

Executive Summary

In August 2014, spurred in part by end-user challenges experienced with healthcare.gov, the U.S. Digital Service (USDS) was launched to solicit new ideas, solutions, and talent to improve the way the U.S. government builds and buys digital services—ultimately to overhaul the level of service provided to U.S. citizens and businesses. Working with the Office of Federal Procurement Policy (OFPP), USDS began accepting proposals for solutions that would strengthen government's digital services acquisition expertise, reduce the risk of failed acquisitions and systems, and save taxpayer dollars. ICF was on a winning proposal that directly addressed these challenges.

As part of its solution, ICF deployed its Dynamic Learning Platform. This platform is built on the open source edX platform and includes customized learning paths along with a combination of instructional strategies that move participants from theoretical knowledge and understanding to demonstrated learning, advocacy, and on-the-job application. The program uses an Agile approach to learning that serves as a signal for the software development methodology its graduates need to understand.

The highly successful pilot program concluded on March 31, 2016, with 28 participants successfully completing it. ICF is currently implementing the second iteration of the program with 30 participants from across various government agencies.

Success Story

In a follow-up survey conducted after the pilot program's conclusion, 72% of respondents indicated that they were either initiating innovate methods and strategies or looking for ways to initiate innovation in the digital acquisition process.

Delivered on a customized edX platform, course materials are delivered to participants in two-week iterations combined into four-week releases. Continuous feedback—the hallmark of agile development—informs real-time adjustments to course content and pacing, and allow for individualization of the learning experience.

Several key aspects of the program made it a standout to help the USDS achieve an ideal solution to its challenges:

Agile approach to learning

ICF's Dynamic Learning Platform offers a rigorous assessment process, continuous feedback, and learner analytics that drive dynamic and relevant content design. This approach to customized learning helps ensure adaptability to participant needs and allows for flexibility through iterative releases to ensure engagement and relevance. The approach also assists in scalability and sustainability, which in turn helps reduce the need for costly course revisions—a key budget-planning factor for resource-strapped organizations. What's more, the solution serves as a signal for behavior change with the same innovative, flexible design principles used in the digital services that participants will procure for future U.S. government digital initiatives.

Mix of learning modalities

ICF structured the Dynamic Learning Platform in a way that allows participants to follow customized learning paths, enabling them to learn a concept, practice it in the classroom, return to their organization to test the new ideas and behaviors, and receive support from instructors, as needed. Throughout the program, participants apply these new learnings to a "live" digital services assignment—a group project in which they are partnered with agency professionals to solve a current acquisition challenge. Consequently, participants are equipped with technical knowledge as well as consulting and change leadership skills to serve as the primary catalysts for change in how the government procures digital services.

By accommodating a mix of learning modalities, ICF's solution reinforces habit creation and promotes critical thinking by moving participants from awareness of concepts to practical application with real-world results.

Efficient, open source technology

The Dynamic Learning Platform required cataloguing large amounts of learning materials to make these easily accessible to participants, and to provide a secure space for discussion and collaboration. To avoid major investments and help lower costs, ICF built the solution within the edX open source learning platform, providing a single source for all tools related to the program. The open source nature of the solution also made it simple for government employees to run on legacy systems, and helped to keep program expenses at a minimum.

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About ICF

ICF (NASDAQ:ICFI) is a global consulting and technology services provider with more than 5,000 professionals focused on making big things possible for our clients. We are business analysts, policy specialists, technologists, researchers, digital strategists, social scientists, and creatives. Since 1969, government and commercial clients have worked with ICF to overcome their toughest challenges on issues that matter profoundly to their success. Come engage with us at **icf.com**.

The Results

With an emphasis on application, demonstrated learning, and transformational culture change, Dynamic Learning Platform participants are equipped with the knowledge and skills to serve as the primary catalysts for change within their U.S. government organizations.

ICF's pilot program with USDS concluded on March 31, 2016, with 28 participants successfully completing it. ICF is currently implementing the second iteration of the program with 30 participants from across various government agencies.

In a post-pilot survey conducted three months after the conclusion of the pilot program, 83% of survey respondents indicated they have noticed a difference in their job behavior as a result of what they learned in the program. 72% of respondents indicated that they were either initiating innovate methods and strategies or looking for ways to initiate innovation in the digital acquisition process. According to one participant, "I have a new level of satisfaction and enjoyment with my career, and feel like I've had the 'ceiling' removed and am not constrained in my approach to new ideas or techniques and the value I can provide."

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