

Agile Government Leadership
Case Study



Agile Government and The Department of Justice

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Intro

Over the two decades leading up to 2014, Justice.gov, the primary website for the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) grew from a few pages into a massive repository of more than 450,000 web pages, documents, and media files. The website's content had become an electronic library: a critical online resource for citizens in the legal, law enforcement, and government transparency communities. Thanks to a recent visual and information architecture redesign, on the surface the site met visitor expectations.

Beneath the surface, more than 100 individual DOJ offices each maintained their own section of the website with different technologies, conventions, and processes. The patchwork set of technologies powering the website were an increasingly difficult burden to maintain.

Challenges

For a number of years, the Department desired a technology modernization and consolidation project for the website, and identified two major challenges:

- How could a modernization project be managed efficiently for a system with widely distributed ownership and management?
- How should such a complex, visible project be implemented successfully, affordably, and with limited risk?

Solution

The DOJ team designed an approach utilizing the Scrum agile methodology and the lean product development concept of Minimum Viable Product. This approach would be used

to implement 1,700 known user stories and whatever else the project team encountered along the way, delivered in 12 major version releases.

The focus of the first version release would be to build a new website content management system and launch one section (out of 120 total sections) of the website. While the content management system would be architected with the fully functional end-goal in mind, only the absolutely-necessary features would be developed and launched. The first release would also establish a mechanism to allow the legacy and modernized web technologies to co-exist, presenting a unified, seamless user experience for website visitors. This mechanism would allow DOJ's team to avoid a high-risk, high-stakes, all-or-nothing "big bang" launch that a waterfall methodology project would have required.

In the second version release and beyond, content from additional sections of the website would be incrementally migrated into the modernized system. New features and functionality would be developed and launched if the product ownership team could justify a net positive return on the investment of time and budget.

Results

As planned, the first version release of one site section was accomplished on budget, within four months. This small, early success encouraged many DOJ offices to support the unconventional approach.

User feedback and project team retrospectives from the first release became an input to planning the second release, which delivered more functionality and took less time. As the third, fourth, and fifth releases were completed, it became clear that the project team was becoming more efficient with each release. As the news of positive results spread among impacted stakeholders, the potential for intransigence over DOJ offices' conflicting

requirements gave way to compromise and collaboration. Stakeholders impacted by the earlier releases became peer-advocates to stakeholders who would be impacted by later releases.

Also, the ability for stakeholders to practice with the modernized system helped them articulate requests for new website features. As new needs emerged, the project team weighed tradeoffs in costs and benefits before validating the priorities for each upcoming major release.

The agile approach allowed the DOJ web services team flexibility, from sprint-to-sprint and release-to-release, to side-step these challenges and keep the overall project on track. The agile approach did not necessarily reduce the number of challenges, but it mitigated the impact of each challenge and allowed for contingency plans that would not have been possible in a traditional waterfall approach.

The agile approach proved itself to executives, system owners, and stakeholders as the right method for the job. Going forward, the DOJ draws on this successful experience for confidence that agile can and does work in government.

About Agile Government Leadership

Mission

By bringing applied Agile practices to government, we want to redefine the culture of local, state and federal public sector service delivery across all aspects of government. We will work with Agile professionals and organizations to support their work in getting Agile infused into government processes. We will foster a spirit of openness and mentor those new to Agile so that they have the necessary practical advice, resources, tools and community support for successful deployment. Through Agile Government Leadership,

we will create a responsive, engaged government that more efficiently and effectively serves its citizens.

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