



THE COMPUTERWORLD HONORS PROGRAM

CASE STUDY

LOCATION:
*Washington, DC,
United States*

YEAR:
2006

STATUS:
Laureate

CATEGORY:
*Government and
Non-Profit Organizations*

NOMINATING COMPANY:
Booz Allen Hamilton Inc.

ORGANIZATION:

US Department of Labor

PROJECT NAME:

GovBenefits.gov

Summary

GovBenefits.gov is the official benefits Web site of the U.S. Government. This innovative Web site helps improve the lives of citizens from all walks of life by making information on more than 1,000 government benefit and assistance programs more accessible. The site features a citizen-friendly eligibility screening tool and a portal architecture that makes the technology easily transferable to other government entities.

Introductory Overview

Context

Prior to April 2002, citizens in search of benefit or assistance information on the Internet you had to cull through more than 30 million Web pages within the federal government to find what they were seeking. Recognizing the need to make benefit information more accessible, in late 2001, officials from U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) along with senior leaders from the United States Department of Labor (DOL) established GovBenefits.gov as part of the President's Management Agenda to make government more accessible to citizens. Recognizing that DOL and OMB needed the support of agencies administering benefits, the two agencies enlisted the support of 10 key Federal agencies and in just 96 days went from concept of operations to a live Web site featuring a total of 55 federal programs from all 10 partner agencies.

Goals

The overarching goals for GovBenefits.gov were two-fold:

1. Create a comprehensive database of benefits and assistance programs scattered across the Federal and state governments.
2. Create an easy-to-use, citizen friendly interface for helping determine eligibility for the benefits within the database.

Methods and Scope



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To help make the vision of creating an easy-to-use Web site with a comprehensive suite of benefits and assistance programs a reality, DOL contracted with a strategy and technology firm to design, develop and implement GovBenefits.gov. The site was initially developed using the Java programming language since it was a well documented and supported programming language and was compatible with the General Services Administration's hosting environment where the site is hosted. While the technology behind GovBenefits.gov was routine, its application and development a major improvement for citizens searching for help.

Gathering information for inclusion on the Web site was an equally important process. From the outset, DOL wanted GovBenefits.gov to be a comprehensive source for benefits and assistance information. To make this a reality, the program dedicated two full-time resources for the gathering and processing benefit program information into the site. The data collection process involved researching programs, contacting agencies for point of contact information, verifying eligibility criteria and finally entering the information into the GovBenefits.gov content management system.

As the program matured, it became clear that program governance needed to evolve from ad hoc monthly partner meetings and conference calls to a formalized partner participation and funding model. As an outcome of a collaborative strategic planning process held in August 2004 a two-pronged governance structure emerged. The first body that was established and meets monthly is the Change Control Board (CCB). The CCB is comprised of mid-level agency employees responsible for day-to-day contact with GovBenefits. The CCB provides input and direction for the program from both a policy and tactical standpoint. The second governance structure is the Governance Board (GB) which meets quarterly. The Governance Board is comprised of partner agency Chief Information Officers and ratifies all CCB decisions and provides important strategic direction and leadership support for the program.

Achievements

Since the site's launch in April 2002 the site has grown from 55 programs and 10 partners to 1,000 benefit and assistance programs including benefits from all 50 states and 25 federal partners. Additional achievements include:

- GovBenefits.gov attracts 300-350,0000 visitors each month.
- GovBenefits.gov has served more than 21 million people
- Referred nearly 4.5 million visitors to benefit information that meets their specific needs.

Benefits

The GovBenefits.gov mission is to make government more efficient and easier to access for citizens. GovBenefits.gov accomplishes its mission by simplifying access to government information, rather than endless Internet searches across many government websites. Citizens are able to determine their potential eligibility for assistance by completing an easy-to-use online questionnaire. Before GovBenefits.gov, citizens had to know which agency administered specific programs and then seek them out to find the information. With GovBenefits.gov, citizens are presented with a custom report that lists the benefits for which they are most likely eligible to receive. The GovBenefits.gov program team receives regular feedback from citizens through the



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GovBenefits.gov feedback email about how great they think the site is; one citizen wrote in said, "You did your homework, great site!" this comment is typical of the positive feedback the site receives.

The GovBenefits.gov team went a step further to improve Government-to-Citizen interaction by designing the Web site to allow other government agencies to use the GovBenefits.gov database and rules engine on their own Web sites. Furthermore, agencies are able offer GovBenefits.gov features without duplicating the technology that powers the site. For example, the State of California or any other government entity can now offer all of the search features and eligibility screening functionality of GovBenefits.gov on the state's homepage without any major programming or software development. This transferability is possible with the new portal technology recently deployed on the site. The portal architecture used allows the GovBenefits.gov technology to be available on compatible portal based Web sites or it can be used as a pop-up page on the state's Web site. GovBenefits calls these affiliated sites "Customized Connections." The new architecture creates a virtually unlimited number of access points to the GovBenefits.gov database and eligibility questionnaire making benefits and assistance information even more accessible to the public.

The Importance of Technology

During the summer of 2001, then OMB Director, Mitchell Daniels convened a task force dubbed the "Quick Silver Task Force" to gather and analyze hundreds of possible E-Government programs and initiatives with the goal of harnessing information technology to improve access to government and reduce bureaucracy. Out of the task force in late 2001 came GovBenefits.gov and 23 other E-Gov programs.

Before GovBenefits.gov there were directories and books of benefits and grants, however, the information was often sorted in non-citizen friendly ways such as by agency or by broad categories. Citizens would have to flip through 1,000+ page paper catalogs just to find a program and then figure out on their own if they might qualify. With the emergence of the Internet, much of this information moved online, but there was no easy way to access it; much of the information was just digitized versions of the paper based books.

At the heart of GovBenefits.gov is a scalable database rules engine that was custom developed for this application. Unlike other benefit catalog or directory Web sites, the rules engine provides the logic for the questionnaire to process the eligibility screening. While other off-the-shelf database rules engines are available, the rules engine developed for GovBenefits uniquely meets the program's need to handle multiple types of eligibility criteria and benefits.

From the site launch in 2002 through early 2006, the site underwent a series of upgrades and improvements including the addition of new programs and improved search functionality. However, in February of 2006, GovBenefits.gov unveiled version 6.0. This latest version of the site represented a major upgrade of the site, from a traditional hard-coded Web site to a portal architecture which represents the latest in Web site architecture and system design.

There were two driving reasons for the site upgrade. First, a portal-based architecture would be less expensive to maintain. The addition of a drag and drop interface makes updates and minor site modifications easy to make thereby requiring fewer labor hours which translates into lowering operating costs for the partners. Second, a portal architecture enables significant new



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functionality for the site including accepting and distributing RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds, an enhanced ability to provide services such as online applications, and other Web 2.0 services.

Originality

As previously mentioned, before GovBenefits.gov there were catalogs and various books for sale that would tell you how to get “free government money.” However, there was no simple, single point-of-access for someone to determine their eligibility. A citizen would have to call each office, talk with a caseworker and begin the application process all of which takes time and energy without any real understanding if they would qualify. When GovBenefits.gov launched in April 2002 it was the first online benefits eligibility screening tool and it reduced the search time from 30 minutes to just five minutes. Although a number of eligibility screening tools have since been launched, GovBenefits.gov remains the tool with the most comprehensive list of benefits and the only tool designated as the official benefits website of the US Government. Other screening tools tend to be more narrowly focused on one particular program or demographic such as senior citizens.

In addition, there are numerous government software code sharing initiatives, but GovBenefits.gov is one of the few programs that is actually making its technology available on another agencies’ Web site without any major development costs.

Success

From a citizen perspective, more than 21 million people have visited GovBenefits.gov; that represents almost 10 percent of the U.S. adult population. Today, the site attracts 300,000-350,000 visitors per month and refers close to one million visitors to partner agencies per year. GovBenefits.gov helps citizens come to partner agencies with a better understanding of their eligibility for a program as well as more information about a program’s specific benefits. This additional information on the part of the citizen helps reduce frustration in finding the right program and the right agency.

From the site’s launch in 2002, the site has been popular with American public, with 300,000 visitors per month. In just four years spending less than \$150,000 per year on public outreach, we have reached almost 10% of the US adult population.

Difficulty

To launch a Web site that provides information from 10 federal agencies in just three months was a significant accomplishment on its own. While OMB and senior DOL leaders provided much of the impetus and energy for the project, the original ten partners also had to share the vision for GovBenefits.gov. To this end, DOL began and continues an active stakeholder relationship program. During the initial start-up of the program, the GovBenefits.gov Program Manager went on a “Road Show” meeting with executives from all of the partner agencies to share with them the vision for GovBenefits.gov and illustrate a clear value proposition for the program. At first, some partners objected to providing funding for the program, but with regular communication and demonstrating results, the partners now see how GovBenefits.gov helps them meet their mission of providing benefits and assistance; other agencies see GovBenefits.gov