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A Blueprint for Human-Centered Change

How redesigning Michigan's benefits application created a model for vast government transformation.

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A blueprint for change on the floor of Civilla's large industrial space depicts pain points in the benefits application process.

GOVERNMENT TECHNOLOGY/DAVID KIDD



A blueprint for lasting and effective governmental change might be lying on the floor right now in an unheated storage space in Detroit.

This blueprint is a 100-foot-long, colorful document drawn on white paper, and it's only abstractly about change. Materially, it's a story of what applicants went through when applying for food assistance, disaster relief or other help via Michigan's Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS), which until this year had the longest public benefits application in the nation. The change blueprint was developed by Civilla, a design studio located in an office beside the storage space, and it was shaped by more than 4,000 hours of interviews with benefits applicants as well as public servants and caseworkers who process requests.

When Civilla started its work in 2015, the MDHHS benefits application form clocked in at a massive 45 pages, 8,000-some words and 1,000 questions. The blueprint was created during Civilla's effort to redesign the form and to reduce its dense wording, walls of text and ample redundancies.

Civilla used human-centered design, based on end-user needs rather than existing government systems, to make the form faster, friendlier and more efficient without sacrificing vital information. In some ways, however, redesigning the form was the easy part. The greater difficulty was pitching the redesign — dubbed Project Re:form — to the state, a process that required navigating the governmental maze of procurement, stakeholder buy-in and other procedural difficulties.

Essentially, Civilla was a private company that found a challenge in government and wanted to use their expertise and resources to fix it. This isn't an unusual story. Civilla, however, also successfully pitched their idea to the state.

And it's good they did. Earlier this year, MDHHS took that idea and rolled out a revised benefits application with just 3,904 words, 18 pages and 213 questions; early indications show the new form coming in 94 percent complete compared to a previous average of 72 percent, which required caseworkers to reach out to applicants for additional information.

How did Civilla team with the state on this innovative, modern and extensive redesign within one of its largest agencies? The answer is — in part — found on that blueprint on the floor in Detroit.

PITCHING PROJECT RE:FORM

Leaders from the MDHHS first came to Civilla's office in Detroit on a frigid winter day, bundled in big coats and gloves and scarves, remembered Civilla CEO Michael Brennan. The company's office is on the second floor of a repurposed building in downtown Detroit where years ago Chevy designed the first Corvette.

When the government leaders got off the elevator, Brennan and his team had fixed up the hallway to look like a public benefits office, complete with chairs, people filling out forms and ambient office noises piped in over speakers. Brennan gave them a copy and asked them to complete the form, waiting a full 15 minutes as they struggled with questions, including a now-infamous inquiry asking the dates an applicant's children were conceived.

"That was the first time some of them had seen the application," said Lena Selzer, Civilla's director of design. "I think it was really eye-opening for them."

Afterward, the team led the state officials into the storage room where the blueprint for lasting and effective change was spread on the floor, all 100 feet of it, taking attendees through a journey of what happens after a resident turns in an application.

The blueprint includes simple blue and orange drawings depicting the snags Civilla's human-centered research uncovered, such as caseworkers sending paper letters to clients asking for paystubs, clients subsequently mailing paystubs back, clients not knowing what the status of their application was for weeks at a time, etc.

"It was designed intentionally to have them feel how it felt to interact with the system, not just intellectually understand it," Selzer said. "We feel today this is one of the biggest reasons we ended up taking a step toward working with [the state]."

There is a universality to the pain points in the blueprint for anyone who has dealt with complex systems.

It wasn't that the state set out to design it like that, said Bob Wheaton, a spokesman for MDHHS, but over the years the form grew unwieldy as agencies and processes consolidated. The department wanted to improve it, but staff was so consumed with daily business that it was just too difficult. Having an outside actor like Civilla was vital.

THE LESSONS LEARNED

Civilla feels a bit out of place in a Midwestern city where mechanics and functionality have long reigned supreme. Civilla is a company where a team of seven or eight meets twice a day in a plywood hut they call a dream cocoon to touch base and refocus on life and work. Civilla's CEO takes hours out of his day to walk visitors through the MDHHS form redesign journey — with its various triumphs and setbacks — because he so firmly believes that its lessons can show the world how to improve complex structures that modern individuals have been lost within.

And, indeed, there is much to be gleaned here. The tenets of user-centered design are spreading quickly throughout the public sector, as state and local governments race to launch websites, mobile apps and service portals aimed at providing better experiences for constituents. Civilla is now teaming with Code for America to simplify Michigan's online and mobile applications much the same way it did for paper versions.

Many intangible victories and much gumption made Civilla's story possible, from leaders at the MDHHS such as Deputy Director of Field Operations Administration Terry Beurer championing the work to some of Civilla's staffers coming to the project from Stanford University's Hasso Plattner Institute of Design.

One constant, however, was that when stakeholders were given a sense of how actual humans involved felt, it motivated them to act, to consider a new way of doing things, to say yes.

Part of what the blueprint shows is the importance of a human approach to successful change. Vital to Civilla's work with the form was the first end user they spoke with, Dr. LaTina Denson, a Michigan resident who suffered a stroke at age 38 and needed assistance from MDHHS. Civilla spent hours with Denson, learning about her journey through the system.

Denson speaks highly not just of the redesigned form but also of the effort put forth by Civilla.

"It was just a breath of fresh air," Denson said. "Before working with [Civilla], all I could do was talk to my family and friends. I was looking for someone to listen like them, to listen and feel my pain."

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