

Creating A Digital Services Team

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Introduction

This document is designed to help guide the Kansas City, Missouri (KCMO) Health Department in the creation of their Digital Services Team. This was made by the 2016 Code for America (CFA) Fellows along with [David Huebner](#) and [Caitlin Docker](#).

The goal of this document is to bring together resources and provide foundations for the future success of the KCMO Health Department's Digital Services Team.

To understand how a digital services team may operate, we have broken down some key recommendations into the following parts:

1. What is a Digital Services Team?
2. A high-level overview of 21st Century Government Practices
3. Important resources when building a digital services team
4. A few best practices to hire and retain talent
5. Key questions to ask as you put together your checklist of next steps

What is a Digital Services Team?

A digital service team has an unwavering passion to help build effective, user-centered digital services focused on the interaction between government and the external and internal people it serves.

Digital Services Team vs. IT

We commonly get the question, “how does a Digital Service Teams differ from traditional IT teams?” We think it is important to define the difference, as both play crucial roles in the delivery of services.

The Role of IT

IT is responsible for core services that make up the backbone of technology.¹ It ensures computers are up to date and secure, software is installed, printers are printing, internet connections are strong, and phones are working.

IT is made up of 3 core parts:

1. **Back office software:** Day-to-day core services like email, human resources management, budgeting, fiscal and accounting that all departments rely on.
2. **Mission IT:** The business applications that run the internal processes of departments and agencies. These are often custom, but can now make use of underlying commodity technology.
3. **Infrastructure:** Network and connectivity, hosting and device management.

Government IT plays an important role. However, it is also unfortunately often viewed as “all things technology.” There are many responsibilities that are defaulted to IT that in the private sector are handled different departments. The expansion of digital services into government is a movement to bring new resources to government, to help governments better serve their residents through technology.

The Role of a Digital Services Team

Digital services are the internal and external interfaces with government services. Digital services are often described as the services residents use to engage and do business with the City. GetCalFresh, RecordTrak, and Healthcare.gov are all examples of digital services. This can also include APIs and open data programs. Digital Services Team members combine expertise across multiple disciplines

¹ This information has been summarized from the blog post “[The CIO Problem, Part 1](#)”

and embody agile philosophies and practices to transform how the government works and delivers services, making them more efficient, personalized, and easier to use.

It is important to note that digital service teams implementing “user-centered” research have multiple “users” to consider: 1) The content experts (government workers and partners delivering the services) and 2) the end users (residents) that receive the services.

And Now an Analogy

In describing the difference between IT and Digital Services, we often use the following analogy to best describe it.

- A car has an engine - Traditional IT
- A car has a dashboard - Digital Services

Similar to a car’s engine, IT is everything that it is under the hood, with Digital Services being the dashboard that interfaces the car with the driver. Both are crucial for the car, though in different ways. A separate skillset is needed to design, build and maintain an engine, versus a car dashboard.

21st Century Government Practices

Over the past five years of building digital services with local governments around the country, we've identified seven practices that help governments work for the people, by the people in the 21st Century.

1. Start with people's needs

Begin projects by conducting research with real people to understand who they are, what they need, and how they behave. Design programs and services around those needs, continuously test with users, and refine policy and processes accordingly.

2. Ensure everyone can participate

Create ways for every community member to productively participate in decisions about issues that affect them. Proactively reach out to a cross section of your community, communicate using language that's easy to understand, and engage people through diverse channels that meet people where they are.

3. Start small and iterate

When you are building or buying government technology, start small and get a working Minimum Viable Product (MVP) into people's hands as early as possible, test with users frequently, and make continuous improvements based on feedback.

4. Use real-time data to inform decisions

Set key metrics to determine if programs and services are regularly meeting objectives and analyze the data to gain insights and drive actions that help improve community outcomes.

5. Default to open

Work in the open, proactively publish public data online, and collaborate with the community to help make programs and services better for everyone.

6. Build the right team

Invest in people who value the role of digital at all levels of the organization. Increase tech skills and literacy among staff, hire new tech talent where it's needed, and build multidisciplinary teams focused on delivery.

7. Make informed technology choices

Understand where, when, and how to build, buy, or use existing technology in order to run efficient and effective operations, and deliver services online that meet the needs of the people using them.

<http://www.codeforamerica.org/practices/>

Important Resources

Building a Digital Services Team

[UK Digital Services Manual - Set up a service team at each phase](#)

[18F - What is a Digital Services Team?](#)

Resources from Thought Leaders

[Digital Services Team Playbook by 18F](#)

[San Francisco Digital Services Strategy](#)

[UK Digital Service Manual](#)

[US Digital Services Digital Playbook](#)

[GDS \(UK\) Design Resources](#)

Over Governments as Resources

[David Huebner](#), the Director of Talent at Code for America, has agreed to connect you with the following resources. They have been selected as they have experience creating digital service teams.

Please reach out to him at to discuss this further!

- **San Francisco Human Services Agency, Innovation Office**
- **Digital Services, City and County of San Francisco**
- **MassIT, Commonwealth of Massachusetts**

Acquiring Talent

It is important to consider the entire candidate lifecycle while hiring. Posting a role on the correct job boards and writing an amazing job description are the first steps. Great candidates expect and look for supportive work environments. At Code for America, we think about the process in four steps:

1. Outreach and Recruitment
2. Assessing Talent
3. Setting the candidate up for short term success
4. Setting the candidate up for long term success

Outreach and Recruitment

The outreach process does not stop once the job has been posted. In our experience, the recruitment of talent is most successful when keeping the following ideas in mind:

1. Go out and recruit great candidates. We encourage organizations to reach out to people around them and to encourage those people to apply and to get the word out to their network. Active sourcing can often yield great candidates.
2. Lead with impact. Many are drawn to this work for the opportunity to improve our communities and affect change directly.
3. Do not underestimate the power of personal branding. Candidates can be attracted to big challenges and the ability to build their skills towards future goals.
4. Consider the work environment they will be joining, and use it as a way to entice potential talent. Set the workers up for success. Will they be empowered to make big decisions? Will they have a flex schedule? What equipment/software will they get to use?
5. Successful candidates do not need to be experts in health, as they will use technical skills along with the skills of content experts (health department employees) to leverage success. Experience from other industries can be beneficial to their ability to approach problems.
6. Find ways to showcase the new approach the team represents, recruiting and branding through non-traditional channels.
 - a. Reach out to local tech, government, health and community meetup groups
 - b. Use linkedin, angellist, indeed, etc.
 - c. Leverage the [CFA Job Board](#) and other civic tech resources
7. Outline the organizational commitment behind the team, including support from senior leadership.
8. What are some key perks to highlight?
9. Market the role in an attractive way.
 - a. First Digital Services Team for a Health Department in the country
 - b. Autonomy and opportunity to create and define the role
 - c. Impactful work that improves the lives of the residents of KCMO

Assessing Talent

There are a few best practices to consider when assessing candidates. A lot of the information in this section is rooted in research conducted at Google and at other organizations to improve their people practices. To learn more about this work, please visit <https://rework.withgoogle.com/>.

Here are a few key ideas to remember when assessing talent:

1. Communicate openly with the candidates.
 - a. Set expectations around timeline.
 - b. Communicate not only when the candidate advances, but also if the candidate is not moving forward in the process.
2. Hiring by committee increases the probability for a successful hire. It is recommended to have 3 - 4 people across **ALL** levels of positions to discuss this.
3. Ensure resume screening is done in an unbiased way.
 - a. Removing names from resumes and evaluating a candidate history horizontally (in comparison to vertically, as resumes are often arranged) has been proven to reduce unconscious bias.
4. Use structure and criteria to eliminate unconscious biases.
 - a. **Do a [job analysis](#) and use it to define [hiring attributes](#).**
 - b. **Use agreed upon role criteria before looking for a candidate.**
 - i. **Make sure there is alignment as to what is wanted in the role**
 - c. Draft consistent interview questions beforehand, with room for follow-up.
 - i. Do not focus on 'traditional' technical interview questions such as whiteboarding or on the spot logic questions - they do not result in better outcomes
 - ii. Ask questions regarding personal projects and interests - hire those that like to learn
 - iii. Do a 'pairing' interview
 - d. **Structure the time of the interview to ensure there are the following items:**
 - i. Initial Prompt
 - ii. Interview Questions
 - iii. Candidate Questions
 - iv. Wrap Up
 - e. Include both behavioral (describe a time where you have....) and hypothetical (imagine you were in the role and X happened, what would you do?) questions.
 - f. **Use a [grading rubric](#).**

Short Term Team Success

The success of a digital services team depends on the environment and support structures. Integrating the team into the department, as they will be working with a wide array of teams. The user-centered process requires research and understanding of the problems before building any products.

Here are some important items to consider when thinking about short term success of the digital services team:

1. Identify problems that could be quick wins to build trust and momentum
2. Ensure the team has important meetings with key stakeholders pre-planned so they can start immediately
3. Design trainings to get them up to speed on department policies and values
 - a. Ensure they understand
 - i. Journey Mapping
 - ii. Web Writing
 - iii. Content Types
 - iv. Analytics
 - v. User Research
4. Have their computers and resources delivered before they start
5. Ensure the team space has been allocated to them before they start
6. Set some goals for the team for the first day and the first week
 - a. Work with the team to define goals for the first month, first 90 days and first 6 months
 - b. Ensure there are regular reviews and check-ins to support bi-directional feedback
7. Provide 'air coverage' to allow autonomy and the opportunity to explore and research
 - a. Focus on outcomes, not tasks
8. Work with the team early on to establish Team Core Values, similar to Code for America's "21st Century Government Practices"
9. Have a clear scope of role to ensure the ability to focus and iterate on projects
 - a. Have a clear separation of responsibilities between IT and Digital Services
10. Have the team establish team processes, including those around team structures
 - a. It is important that these remain flexible, and serve merely as a starting point
 - i. What tools the team use?
 - ii. How will the team track issues?
 - iii. Which languages will the team default to?
 - iv. What will the team sprints look like?
 - v. How will the team manage documents?
 - vi. When will the team have standups?
 - vii. Will the team have regular retros?

Long Term Team Success

The market for digital services professionals is competitive. The environment and support structures must align with the type of candidates you want to attract. In our experience, we have found that the most successful candidates have qualities that thrive in environments that support focusing on outcomes, flexible work environments and continued learning. By and large, successful candidates will be those that value professional growth and learning. How can you support this?

Consider the following to support long term team success:

1. Allow for opportunities for growth professionally, including conferences, workshops and classes, and provide a professional development budget
 - a. Studies show that investments in professional development lead to higher productivity, employee satisfaction, and retention
2. Provide mentorship and growth resources
 - a. If the skillsets are not within the department, look outside and through the greater tech network for structured mentorship
3. Allocate time for the team to focus on interesting and beneficial projects outside the scope of their main work
 - a. Often times, digital service teams have 'hack-days' or 'flex-time' where the team focuses on building an internal tool, or an interesting product that could help either the team or department outside of their normal work
4. Create an environment that supports collaboration and social workspaces
 - a. 'Silos' of information and working styles are counter productive - ensure the team works collaboratively and with other teams
 - b. Provide whiteboards, post-it notes, and space that allow for collaborative work
5. Create a library/list of access to learning resources
 - a. What resources are available through the public library?
 - b. Does the city have collective access to learning resources?
6. Results driven environment
7. Allow for flexible work schedules
 - a. This is one of the top desires from the modern workforce
 - b. By focusing on outcomes, it will empower the employees to make decisions on when and where best to work
 - c. This creates a culture of trust
8. Cultivate gratitude and positive feedback
9. Support personal brand development and exposure
 - a. Provide opportunities to showcase work
 - b. Support public speaking engagements and refer requests to the team
10. Build a social workplace
 - a. Host lunches, coffees, and happy hours to get the team to bond with each other
 - b. 18F uses Thursday potluck lunches as a way to both connect with each other, but also a free way to invite members of the community to join. These lunches are very popular for outside technology folks, often being sold out weeks in advance. Cost is \$0, as long as you have space.
 - c. Exygy hosts '#CivicTech' happy hours, where they have worked out an agreement with the bar beforehand to extend regular happy hour hours. Cost is \$0.
11. Encourage civic engagement

Key Questions

These questions are an extension of the themes previously mentioned in this document. It is our hope that it helps inspire the development of onboarding checklists and questions to best prepare the organization for the onboarding of the new hires.

1. Defining success
 - a. What will be considered a success for the team short term?
 - b. What will be considered a success for the team long term?
 - c. What are the department's goals for 2017?
 - d. What is the Health Department's mission statement?
2. Defining the roles, with room for adjustment
 - a. What responsibilities will each role have?
 - b. Are you unsure what they should be? Have the employee help define their role--this can help build credibility and trust
3. Setting goals
 - a. What are the goals for each role for the first day? Week? Month? 90 days? 6 months? Year? Two years?
 - b. What are some quick wins the team could have?
 - i. Identify them and have them accomplish it ASAP - Low effort wins are great.
 - ii. Focus on small, specific achievables (e.g if there are many different clinics to work in, maybe start with just one).
 - iii. Ideas:
 1. Setting up all individual accounts with 3rd party technology
 2. Shadow important frontline staff
 3. Have them do "service teardowns" of current processes (with diagramming)
4. Who are the service experts
 - a. Who are the key staff members who will work with the team or be able to provide invaluable institutional knowledge?
 - i. Department heads, clinic heads, software purchasers, registration staff
 - ii. Ensure the Digital Services Team understands their role, and educate the staff around them of their role as well
5. Resources at the start
 - a. Where will their desk space be? Will they have access to other spaces to work?
 - b. What is the process for acquiring tools (hardware and software)?
 - i. In the absence of knowing what tools they will need (hardware and software), establishing a simple process for acquiring additional software and services (and allocate the corresponding budget) is important.

- c. What computer/computers will they use? Are the computers designed for software development?
 - i. Apple and Linux based computers are very popular hardware choices
- d. Do they have all a list of all technologies currently used and logins for each 3rd party service?
- e. Are the computers set up for the work wifi?