Time outs

If your service collects personal or sensitive information, you will need to 'timeout' users' sessions after a period of inactivity. On public computers this would prevent a subsequent user from seeing the first user's information, and also prevent new applications accidentally appending to an abandoned application.

Timeouts work on a per page or per activity basis, and are not a time limit on the total time to complete an application.

The timeout you choose will want to balance security with the need to give users enough time to complete a single page of the transaction. The 'page per thing' pattern means that users only need to provide one thing per page, so should be less likely to cause a timeout.

In practice, most services use timeouts are between 15 - 60 minutes. Services should do user research to find out what an acceptable minimum is, and use analytics to measure the volume of timeouts.

If services expect users are likely to timeout or may need longer periods of time to complete a task, they should investigate save and return functionality.

It shouldn't be necessary to tell the user the timeout before they start. If you do this, many users will think that it represents the total time they have to complete the application.

How to time out the user

1. Five minutes before a timeout is due to occur, display a warning to the user that it will happen.
2. This warning should let the user extend the timeout.
3. If the user does nothing, after five minutes, timeout the user.
4. Redirect the user to a page explaining that the service has timed out, and advising the user what what they can do next.

Examples

Carer's Allowance example

We ran an experiment on Carer's Allowance to try and reduce the amount of time outs. **Note:** There's no save function on this transaction. Experiment details:

Assumption: People think that 'time out' or 'inactive' messages indicate a time limit – "The application will reset if you don't do anything for more than 1 hour - you'll have to restart your application".

User Insights: Some users thought there was a 1 hour time limit when reading the inactive message. This causes anxiety as some people are unsure if they can complete the application in under an hour. Some people don't see the messaging in the start page at all (they just want to get started).
When we tested the heading 'No time limit' in the transaction more people seemed to understand that this wasn't a time limit.

Experiment: "We believe adding a 'no time limit' message will stop users thinking that there's a fixed time limit in which to complete an application. We also believe that this message needs to be present throughout the claim as people will miss it in the start page. We'll know that this is true if we see a reduction in the amount of timeouts from the transaction.

Get help

Can you get Carer's Allowance?

Does the person you care for get one of these benefits?

You can only qualify for Carer's Allowance if the person you care for is in receipt of one of the qualifying benefits listed below.

Personal Independence Payment (PIP)
At either the standard or enhanced rate of the Daily Living Component.

The care component of Disability Living Allowance (DLA)
At the middle or highest rate.

Attendance Allowance (AA)

Constant Attendance Allowance (CAA)
At or above the normal maximum rate as an addition to Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit (IIDB);
or the basic, full day rate as an addition to War Disablement Pension (WDP)

Armed Forces Independence Payment (AFIP)

Yes   No

Next

Data: Since the change the number of timeouts have remained the same. We're now removing the time out messaging in the transaction. Instead, we're going to run another experiment and increase the time out to longer than 60 minutes. We believe the reason we see time outs is that 60 minutes is not enough time for people that might be caring for someone while they're completing an application.