



The Computerworld Honors Program

Honoring those who use Information Technology to benefit society

Final Copy of Case Study

LOCATION:
Washington, DC, US

ORGANIZATION:
Benefits.gov

YEAR:
2011

ORGANIZATION URL:
<http://www.benefits.gov>

STATUS:
Laureate

PROJECT NAME:
Benefits.gov

CATEGORY:
Digital Access

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Benefits.gov, the official benefits website of the U.S. government, was launched in 2002 as GovBenefits.gov, and operates as a partnership of 17 Federal agencies, with the U.S. Department of Labor as the Managing Partner. The site, in English and Spanish, was developed to provide all American citizens with a single, online source of accurate and information and personalized eligibility prescreening services for over 1,000 Federal and state government benefit programs and their application information, while reducing the expense and difficulty of interacting with the government. Before Benefits.gov, citizens looking for government assistance were forced to search through multiple government websites only to often find out-of-date or conflicting information. Citizens wasted time applying for programs that they were not eligible for and government agencies wasted time and tax dollars reviewing ineligible applications. Benefits.gov was the solution, providing citizens with one reliable, easily accessible resource for benefit information and five different search methods, including a prescreening questionnaire tool that allows citizens to quickly find out what benefits they may be eligible to receive and the steps they must take to apply. Benefits.gov not only delivers government cost savings by significantly reducing the traffic to agency call centers, but also reduces government redundancy by making its prescreening technology available for reuse on other government websites. In September 2010, the Benefits.gov Program accomplished the largest rebranding and redesign effort in the site's history to continue to improve the citizen experience and better execute its mission. The Program redesigned the site's primary prescreening feature in 2010. It's now "Benefit Finder"—an even more customized, dynamic, and confidential eligibility-prescreening tool that enables individuals to answer categorized questions about their current situation and instantly receive a list of benefits they may be eligible to receive. Citizens can also search for benefits by category, state and Federal agency, or by using the search field. With an active social media presence, a quarterly eNewsletter, and a 300,000+ subscriber email page subscription service, Benefits.gov stays connected to citizens and collects and incorporates their feedback to continually improve the site. During the

redesign, Benefits.gov also became one of the first E-Gov programs to operate in the Cloud, using USDA's National Information Technology Center's (NITC) Community Cloud, Platform-as-a-Service, which not only optimizes cost savings by eliminating hardware, but also provides citizens with a faster and more reliable experience on the site. Benefits.gov received over 6 million visits in FY10 alone, and—despite additional unplanned requests throughout each fiscal year—the Program consistently accomplished all endeavors within its annual ~\$4.4M budget. The Benefits.gov Program currently supports four public-facing websites – Benefits.gov, GovLoans.gov, BEST.SSA.gov, and DisasterAssistance.gov.

SOCIETAL BENEFITS

Benefits.gov redesigned and transitioned to the Cloud to help citizens find government assistance faster and more efficiently than ever before. Its powerful prescreening technology is reused across government, creating exclusive content for agency customers, saving time, labor, and taxpayer dollars. Benefits.gov's technological innovation helps society close the government-citizen communication gap.

PREVIOUS PROJECT UPDATED/EXPANDED?

The Phase I implementation of Benefits.gov was completed on September 30, 2010, and Phase II will take place within fiscal year 2011. Phase I included rebranding, the transition to Cloud, a new look and feel for the site and the complete redesign of the prescreening tool. Phase II will include making the "Your Favorites" list accessible throughout the site, as well as making instant eligibility prescreening available for specifically selected benefits. The original Benefits.gov—"GovBenefits.gov," which was named a Computerworld Honors Laureate in 2006—has undergone multiple improvements, upgrades, and the addition of numerous citizen-focused solutions since its launch in 2002. As of September 30, 2010, the Program successfully deployed the largest redesign and rebranding effort of its existence, as well as the transition to a Cloud-hosting environment—in just six months; this project was completed on-schedule and under-budget. By synchronizing this rebranding initiative with a previously planned effort to migrate the Benefits.gov portfolio of websites into the Cloud, the 17-agency Partnership will enjoy even more savings than initially expected from the Cloud migration effort alone. The decision to move to a Cloud-based hosting environment was two-fold: to reduce operating costs and to provide increased capacity and uninterrupted service for citizens, after experiencing over 12 million visits from 2009 to 2010. Benefit.gov's growth and its support for multiple sites—coupled with the increasing number of citizens seeking assistance in the weakened economy—made the need for additional capacity even more urgent. The most significant change to the functionality of the site was the redesign of the eligibility-prescreening tool. The overhauled "Benefit Finder" now features mandatory preliminary questions to ensure more immediate results and also quickly homes in on eligibility for over 1,000 programs from 17 Federal agencies. Previously, citizens had to go through the entirety of the questionnaire before they could submit and then receive results. Now, after answering only a few basic questions, citizens can view their results list at any time and watch as the number of benefits they may be eligible for changes as they answer each question. This dynamic capability allows citizens to return and answer more questions, which are now arranged in categories to focus on specific areas of interest, navigate tabs within the tool, and view and change answers all within the same online session to see how their personal results list changes. The new site also offers the ability to add programs to "Your Favorites," a further customized list of benefit results. Both lists can be printed or emailed for later reference.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION COMPLETE?

Yes

PROJECT BENEFIT EXAMPLE

Benefits.gov's primary stakeholder is, first and foremost, the American people. However, the Program is also an intergovernmental, collaborative effort that partners with 17 Federal agencies to accomplish the Program mission while meeting the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) requirements and requests. Despite this delicate balance, the Benefits.gov Program provides significant value to citizens and agencies alike. With over 1 million referrals to government benefit programs in FY10 and cumulative page views in excess of 200 million, Benefits.gov has provided over \$2 billion in cumulative value to citizens and government over its lifetime. To calculate this value, the Program developed the "citizen minute" concept to express the dollar value of the time citizens save by using the site to locate benefit information. Benefits.gov conservatively estimates that users save 20 minutes on average finding relevant benefits on the site, as opposed to conducting a comprehensive Internet search or using other more costly channels. Citizen value is calculated by taking time savings multiplied by the number of information transactions (defined as each time a site user views a benefit program description page on Benefits.gov or is referred to another agency's website for more detailed information). Government operational value is calculated by taking the cost of the alternative channel – a call center – and multiplying it by the number of information transactions. These values are realized on a regular basis. Soon after the redesign and rebranding, Benefits.gov received a number of complimentary citizen feedback emails. "I just want to express my thanks for this site, which has given me some valuable information that will help in my pursuit," wrote C. Gilmore. "This website gave very good information and easy to go to sites and pages. It gives helpful [links] and easy to read and understand literature. I'm very pleased and satisfied," wrote E. Daniels. Last summer, the White House asked the Benefits.gov Program to be the primary provider of citizen benefits related to the devastating BP Gulf Coast Oil Spill crisis through FEMA's DisasterAssistance.gov, a site reusing Benefits.gov functionality to help disaster victims. Within a few days, the team conducted a successful emergency release on DisasterAssistance.gov, which included deploying a call-out banner to the homepage, adding 14 forms of new assistance, a site page instructing users on how to file a claim with BP, and news and resources pertaining to the spill. This release demonstrated the value of Benefits.gov's reusable "Software as a Service" technology not only for FEMA—as it would have been nearly impossible to produce another effective method of support so quickly and economically—but also for the impacted citizens along the Gulf Coast. Over \$120 million was generated in total value for citizens and government operations in FY10 alone, nearly 30 times the cost to fund the Program.

IS THIS PROJECT AN INNOVATION, BEST PRACTICE?

Yes. Benefits.gov has established itself and its unique technology as an innovative, low-cost, reusable product for government agencies by providing Software as a Service, as well as acting as a portal for critical citizen information. The business decisions of the past fiscal year, including the rebranding, redesign, and move to the Cloud environment, have all helped position the Program to become even more appealing as it continues to offer simple, effective, E-Gov solutions that reduce government waste and save taxpayer dollars. Benefits.gov has become one of the first E-Gov programs to begin operating in the Cloud, using USDA NITC's Community Cloud, Platform-as-a-Service. When Benefits.gov received a site traffic upsurge last year, due in part to a weak economy, it was clear a more cost-effective and scalable hosting solution was critical to ensuring Benefits.gov's future sustainability. Operating in the Cloud has streamlined



the quick acquisition of additional capacity when needed and empowered the business to address new trends and user demands in a competitive and agile manner. Transitioning to the Cloud also increases concurrent user support for multiple Partner agency sites. In the event of a disaster, Cloud's failover technology maintains uninterrupted service regardless of site traffic volume. Benefits.gov currently provides Software-as-a-Service to GovLoans.gov, BEST.SSA.gov and FEMA's DisasterAssistance.gov, delivering powerful prescreening technology and a program database under each agency's brand, creating exclusive content for the agency's customers, saving time and labor for agencies as well as taxpayer dollars. The Program has established best practices for these efforts and has positioned itself to be flexible enough to fulfill requests from other agencies looking to reduce the effort and expense required to maintain similar applications.

ADDITIONAL PROJECT INFORMATION

The Benefits.gov Program has received over 20 government and private sector awards since its inception, including the 2008 Interagency Resources Management Conference (IRMCO) Award from the General Services Administration and the 2009 Government Information Technology Executive Council (GITEC) Project Management Excellence Award, and enjoys an increasing list of partners and community advocate relationships. With over 12 million visits from 2009 to 2010, Benefits.gov has established itself as the go-to source for citizens seeking benefit information. The Benefits.gov Program has had consistent ratings of all "green" (or "good") on its U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Performance Scorecards and a 9.7 (out of a possible 10) rating on the latest, public-facing OMB IT Dashboard. As a result, the Program is frequently used as a case study, an example of E-Gov success and called upon for special requests by other government agencies, OMB and the White House. Along with the redesign efforts, the Program has also revamped its approach to Twitter, using "BenefitsGOV" to engage a new, social media-savvy audience in a dialogue about government assistance. As Twitter evolves as a brand marketing tool, Benefits.gov effectively leverages its functionality, tweeting several times per week, increasing familiarity among citizens and driving traffic to the site by communicating the latest benefit-related information and featured benefits links. Benefits.gov witnessed a 44% increase in Twitter followers from FY09 to FY10.