



Stanford eCorner

Big Opportunities Draw Big Talent

Jennifer Pahlka, *Code for America*

January 14, 2015

Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/3441/Big-Opportunities-Draw-Big-Talent>

Jennifer Pahlka, founder and executive director of Code for America, recalls working in Washington, D.C., when HealthCare.gov first debuted. The experience showed her that opportunities to solve meaningful problems attract top talent, and that technologists are needed to help government implement the policies it creates.



Transcript

And so I went to DC and worked in that building for a year on this for several months getting this ready, people were pretty excited about it and then October 1 came around, October 1, 2013. You guys probably don't remember it, but that's the day that healthcare.gov launched and failed. So my work stopped for a bit. My boss disappeared. He was asked to pull together the team that was going to figure out if the site was savable and in fact, save it. This is some of that team. They ended up on the cover of Time magazine. That's Todd hiding there in the back because he is very shy and doesn't like the spotlight. Right in front of him are two ex-Googlers, Mikey Dickerson, who really ended up leading the team that fixed the current site, the site that the contractors had built kind of with duct tape to sort of get it through the enrolment period. And then next to him, Ginny Kim, who put together the team that rebuilt the site with a team of about 12 people over three months, something that had taken several thousand people and about \$600 million of tax payers' dollars to do and didn't work.

She rebuilt with a team of 12 in about three months. I got to know this team really well. I feel very privileged to have gotten to know them. There were many, many late nights at the office and in fact, one thing that you should know if you ever meet these folks, or many - there are many other folks who are not pictured here obviously. I asked Mikey once, how many hours did you work and he was actually a subcontractor to a subcontractor to the main contractor paid hourly for his work on making healthcare.gov make it through the enrolment period. So he could add those up pretty clearly and he said, I looked at it and at one point, I had worked 20 hours a day straight for 100 days, for 100 days straight. That's heroism. And I think almost of the people who worked on that team did that and if you ever meet them, please thank them for their service to this country because that's quite a feat. And one of those late nights, I was - we were talking in the office about why they were doing this incredible work and Todd was getting the letters that were being sent to the President about - from people who were benefiting from the Affordable Care Act which is what healthcare.gov was implementing. And there were many, many of these letters and I remember some of them and I remember that all of them had a deep impact on me.

But one that I remember in particular was from a mom who said that she - her family had a history of diabetes and cancer but for the past 15 years, she had to choose between healthcare for herself and healthcare for her kids. And that the ACA had meant that for the first time in 15 years, she had gone to see a doctor. And that's why these guys were working 20 hours a day for 100 days straight. And that's why I asked about health insurance because it is really hard to understand the really difficult problems that we face as a country if you don't experience those things yourself and there's very limited opportunities for us to be in that line of fire. Many of us come from backgrounds that do - where we don't have health insurance. But if you do, you need to have opportunities to be aware of the problems that our country faces. There was another time that we were in the office very late at night when the guys were actually going back to the operation center in Columbia, Maryland at about 2:00 in the morning. And I said, guys, you've got to go to sleep sometimes, why are you going there in the middle of the night and they explained to me that in fact, there is pretty high traffic on healthcare.gov. This is about November, December. There is pretty

high traffic on healthcare.gov in the middle of the night but not from desktop browsers, from mobile browsers.

That people were hitting the site in large numbers on low end mobile phones and the pattern was that they would get online - a particular user would get online in the middle of the night, make it about two steps further in the process of enrolling in healthcare, save his or her progress and go back on the next night. And what you're seeing in that moment is using - looking at that data and seeing real users who have real needs. Those are people probably who are working more than one job who obviously don't have Internet access at home and this was the only way that they could navigate this really difficult and complex site and this complex process. But they were going to spend a couple of hours every single night when they knew the traffic was lower to just get a little bit further with it. I think the lesson to learn here, of course, first is that if you want to recruit some of the best technologists in the country, give them something to work on that really matters. And they will succeed. They will not fail their tasks. These guys were amazing in what they did. I think the second lesson is sort of grimmer which is that however you may feel about a policy like the Affordable Care Act, do we really want to live in a world where we can't actually implement the policies that government creates, whatever policy that might be? We almost lost the Affordable Care Act because we couldn't make a website work, something that probably many of you in this room could have done quite well.