Stanford eCorner

Showing Cities the Startup Approach

Jennifer Pahlka, *Code for America*

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Code for America Founder and Executive Director Jennifer Pahlka describes how her organization's entrepreneurial approach pairs government agencies with technologists who create solutions that save taxpayers millions of dollars and months of waiting while still producing simple and intuitive tools that delight users.

Transcript

So I thought what I'd do is take a little step back and tell you about Code for America and a little bit about how it got started and some what we've learned over time. This is our first class of Code for America fellows that came together in the beginning of 2011. So these are folks with several years of experience in the industry, average age of our fellows tends to be about 29 or 30 but recent grads are more than welcome to apply, who take a year out of their careers to give a year of service to their country and we match them with local governments who want to try things in a more startup sort of spirit. And we have a very structured program. I can tell you a little bit more about that in Q&Abut I think I'll tell you more about sort of the work that we have done. One of the first things that happened, we had a team working with the City of Boston in 2011. They actually went in to work on a sort of data platform for education in the Boston Public Schools, which, at that time in our existence was very hard for us to get access to data, movement of open data and trusting data to be outside the walls of an institution was a little bit younger then but - so they were fumbling around with this sort of very grandiose project of an API for all Boston Education Data when the mayor - lovely mayor, may he rest in peace, he was a fantastic mayor in Boston, came to our fellows and said we have a really big problem. We have changed the rules about how kids get assigned to public schools. It's essentially now around trying to have more kids be able to walk to school. So it's essentially a mapping problem and a couple of other rules in there.

But what we've done is published a 28-paged printed brochure with type that small and sent it to all the parents who are now in tears because you can read the 28 pages of four point type and you still have no idea which schools your kids are eligible to attend. Can you help us? And so one of the fellows was working on this API, said let me take this and went off. And eight weeks later, he published - I don't have the slide of the early version, this is what it looks like currently. He published something called DiscoverBPS.org, put it up I think on Amazon and then basically you type in your name, the age of your - the grade that your kid's in and if you have any siblings - the kid has any siblings in another public school, you put your address in and it returns a map list of where you can go to school. So it takes a very long process down to a couple of minutes. Great, fantastic, that's pretty easy to do. But what we - learned in that process we were like, okay, what do we do next? The folks in city government came to us and they said, you don't understand if this had gone through a regular procurement process, this would have taken us at least two years and cost at least $2 million. And I don't think we actually realized at the time because what we were saying - what we were trying to say to the world was, look, these interfaces to government can be simple, beautiful and easy to use. We can have a relationship with government that's as delightful and positive as we have with other institutions through - that are mediated through digital technology. The other thing that really got me about that was it wasn't really about the money, it was about the time.

Imagine being the mayor and having to go to parents and say, yeah, we will get you that in two years. In the meantime, your kids are trying to enroll in school. So this really set a pattern for us of - there's data that needs to made usable to a certain

set of users, we can do that pretty easily and we can put a nice front-end on it and it costs kind of what it should cost in the real world.