

# 18F

# Collaborating

We don't do this work alone

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**Audience:** 18F full team during all hands video conference.

**What do they need to know?** *The good folks working in government aren't the problem. It's more about the prescriptive structures that surround them and the repercussions these structures have, though they may have more tolerance to live within these bounds. Our goal is not so much to do what they cannot, but to help unlock their potential and help --- which have been found to be helpful in contexts that support greater levels of autonomy and experimentation.*

I'm Ed. I'm in the Strategy chapter.

- I was asked to share a little talk I gave recently here at Civic Hall in NYC as part of an 18F brownbag session with Nicole Fenton.

Speaker notes here:

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Qw85joK0JXEBXAch2itFxy7TzdPBO\\_\\_aGbLgTwLXbv4/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Qw85joK0JXEBXAch2itFxy7TzdPBO__aGbLgTwLXbv4/edit)

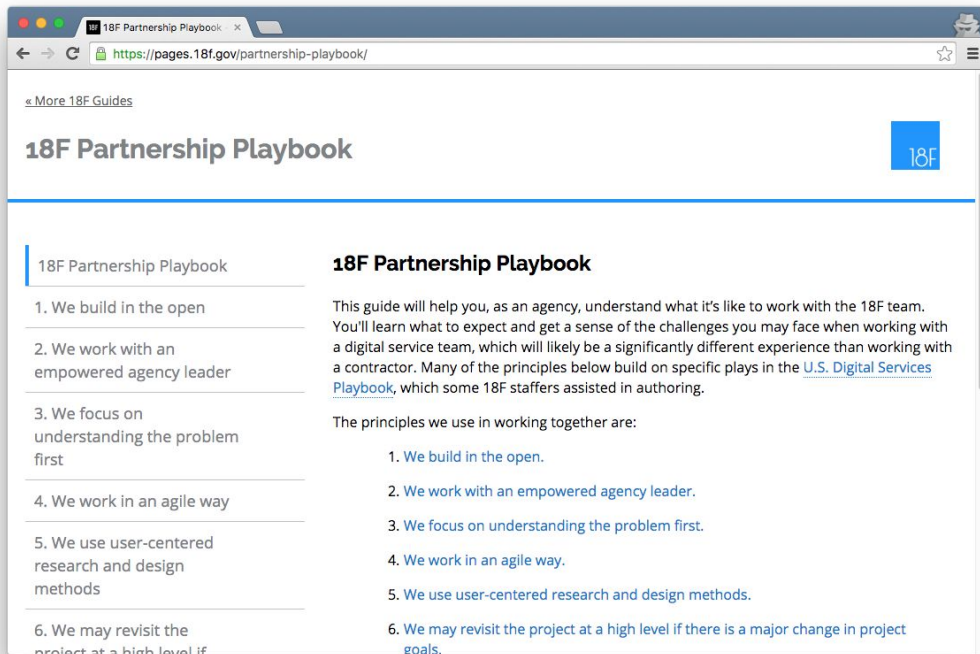
# we don't do this work alone

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As we all know, 18F works with people across government.

- As such, we're inherently collaborative.
- We're opinionated in how we set up collaborations for success.



- From the projects we choose, to the expectations laid out in the partnership playbook.
- And that's important.

# the soft matters that color our interactions with people are equally important

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But beyond the processes and procedures that structure our work, there are softer matters that color the interactions of the people involved that are equally important...

- ...the tone we bring, the way we listen, openness to learning from our partners.
- 18F is in this position where we are cast as “innovators”, “change agents”, or whatever you’d like to call it.

# Innovation Specialists

- Most of us have the same title of “Innovation Specialist”.
- And this is true in many respects. None of us joined because government had everything figured out.
- We joined because there are problems that are real, significant, and important!
- But as with any problem, it’s important to define it properly if we want to correct it.

# the “innovator” role carries risk

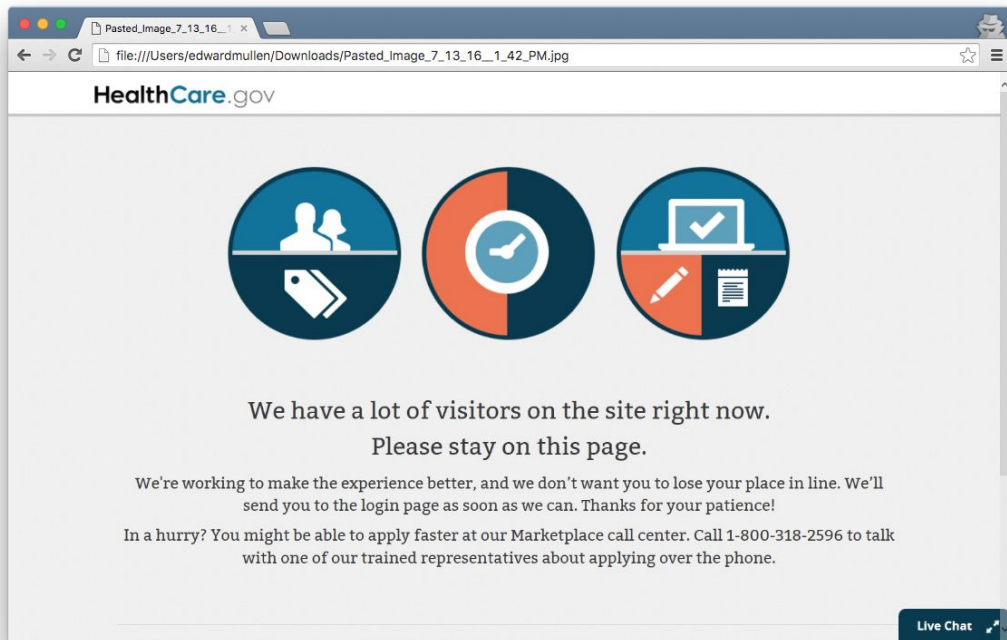


This role of “innovator” carries risk

- It aligns with a narrative that I find very uncomfortable.
- The shorthand version is that an organization has become mired, slow, and entrenched. In order to make significant change, “innovators” from outside are brought in to do what incumbents cannot.
- The story feels fine if you are the innovator. You’re the hero in the story. It is disheartening if you are one of those incumbents. *You* are what must be overcome.

This is close to my heart because I was deeply involved in one of the most visible instances of this storyline. You’ve all heard it many times. In ways, it’s become tangled up with 18F’s creation story.

- This is the quick, bullet-pointy way it’s often repeated:



- October 1, 2013. The Affordable Care Act... HealthCare.gov... failure... millions of dollars... legislation at risk of collapse...
- Then the story goes on:



- An elite team was assembled, and in a few short months, they did what government wasn't able to do in a couple years.



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- Now, I wasn't part of this group—some folks here at 18F were—but I had been working on the project for over a year prior to launch, designing the user experience.
- I'd also spent time in 2010 designing the original version.
- In ways, I was both innovator and incumbent in this story, which gives me perspective on both sides.

## a storyline like this has a number of pitfalls

- It oversimplifies both the problem and the solution, making it harder to draw meaningful lessons for the future.
- It strips away all the context that shapes every aspect of a project.
- Most significant to this discussion, while it *accurately*, **accurately** identifies the heroics of some, it overlooks the valuable contributions of many.

## when you add back the nuance, you get a richer picture

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- For HealthCare.gov, smart people were brought in with a variety of skill to augment **other smart** people who had been on the project for a while, or had previously worked on it.
- When the new folks came in, they brought fresh eyes and very different work experiences, which allowed them to identify problems and put in place processes and tools that created a culture shift.
- But still, a lot of the work of fixing the system was done was by the same people who built the original codebase.
- What changed in the post-failure-to-launch world was the context. There was different leadership and power structures, demands, requirements, tools, goals.
- But many of the people involved before and after the launch were the same. And their stories are part of the HealthCare.gov story.

***“CMS and its contractors adopted a badgeless culture that encouraged full collaboration by CMS staff and contractors regardless of employer status and job title, fostering innovation, problem solving, and communication among teams.”***

HealthCare.gov: Case Study of CMS Management of the Federal Marketplace  
**HHS Inspector General**

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In its review, the HHS Inspector General said that what led to the successful rescue was the development of a “badgeless culture”...

- ...where people were working together, from federal employees, to contractors, to the folks that came in on the fix-it team, some who were from Silicon Valley, but others from other areas of tech and government.

# people in government are a vast pool of talent and part of the solution

When we look at the people who are already at work in government as part of the solution instead of part of the problem, whether they are employees or contractors, we open up a vast pool of talent and institutional knowledge to draw from.

- In my experience, and I'm sure many of you have seen this, these are folks who are extremely smart, competent, and mission oriented.

## they are a lot like us

- They are driven by doing important work for the public good.
- They figured out earlier than most of us that working at places with names like the Department of Health and Human Services, The Environmental Protection Agency, The Centers for Disease Control — places where the very name is an aspirational mission — these are places where they can contribute to meaningful work to the world.
- They willfully entered a heavily bureaucratic institution and work in a heavily prescriptive environment.

# things have been made difficult for them by people who think they know better

- Things have been made difficult for them by people who think they know better.
- And so, there are varying levels of frustration with the bureaucracy, which really is a series of rules that restricts the choices and actions they can make as individual actors.
- And yet they bear the weight of those restrictions.

# be cognizant of the culture we're creating



So when it comes to 18F, it's important for us to be cognizant of the culture we foster.

- We certainly believe our experiences have taught us many important things.
- But we also believe that is true of our partners as well.



# we are not the solution, we're part of it

- We are not the solution. We're just part of it.
- The solution is creating a greater diversity of work and life experiences...
- ...while pushing for a dynamic environment...
- ...where all participants feel empowered to contribute and have agency...
- ...where there's tolerance for risk,
- ...where work is focused on the needs of people,
- ...and there is an openness to trying new things.

# we bring a beginner's mind

We bring a beginner's mind to our short-term deployments.

- We have worked in less prescriptive, more self-directed environments that have allowed us to adopt tools, methods, and approaches more easily.
- As newish people, we're a bit more conscious of the peculiarities of the bureaucracy, and we're more impatient with them.

# our partners bring an experienced mind



Our partners bring a experienced mind to complex challenges.

- They understand the legal, political, and cultural forces at play in their program areas.
- They understand their missions and the nuance of their work.
- They have more historical, institutional knowledge of previous efforts, outcomes and unexpected risks.

# our experiences augment each other

Together, our valuable experiences from outside of government or wherever we've come from, **augment** our partners' valuable experience in government and in their various areas of expertise.

So consider this a quarterly compassion reminder.

- Thinking about and acting intentionally about the collaborative tone we set is important.
- When we collaborate, it's helpful to remember:

**Be humble.**

**Assume competence.**

**Listen.**

**Ask questions.**

**Seek to understand your partner's context.**

**Learn about the power dynamics.**

**Explore their motivations and reasons.**

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- As I said at the beginning, these are soft skills.
- Each situation is different.
- Make space for conversations and interactions that allow you and your partners to talk, share, and learn from one another.

The people we work with have a history.

- They too have developed as professionals over time.
- Some path brought them to the **same** place as you.
- Learn about them.
- Understand why they think and act the way they do.
- Help them excel.
- Your thinking will sharpen.
- Our work will be more effective.
- We're part of a community that extends far beyond 18F and USDS. We can make impact, but not without this community.
- We don't do this work alone.

- Thanks.