

Better for Business

Making interactions with government easier and cheaper is one way to enhance the nation's productivity. New Zealand's first accelerator process for government projects has been successfully trialled by the Result 9 – Better for Business partnership and could prove to be a new approach for government. MARGARET MCLACHLAN explains what's been happening.



Andrew Bardsley, General Manager, Better for Business: "Accelerator is a glimpse of what the public sector might be – innovative, customer-focused, involved in co-design and co-production, and energetic."

Better for Business is a partnership of eight government agencies, led by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, working to make it easier for business customers to deal with government.

General Manager Andrew Bardsley says, "Better for Business is working to reduce costs and improve services and the Result 9 (R9) Accelerator was one way to make a difference, quickly."

A series of five problems, or 'pain points' in the way customers interacted with government were chosen for a pilot. Project teams had 12 weeks (April–June) to turn the problems into solutions; create a Minimal Viable Product; test these with customers; and pitch the solutions as fundable projects on Demo Day.

One of the participants, Graeme Simpson of Statistics New Zealand, says, "The 12 weeks were intense; they flew by. It was a structured, well thought-out process. The first month was spent talking to the customers, finding out what was causing them pain and testing possible solutions. The second month was involved in iterative design and development of our Minimal Viable Product (MVP) and the last month was preparing for Demo Day. The best part was getting out and talking to customers, hearing it directly from them."



Minister Steven Joyce with Glenn Thurston and Samson Phommachack of Vizbot at the R9 Accelerator.

He added, "I come to work to make a difference, and I felt like that was happening every day. We were creating something of value."

Excitement

Bardsley agrees that the energy and excitement generated by the project teams was something he'd like to see more of across the public sector. "The teams were housed together, generating a high level of creativity and excitement. They were listening to customers, making connections with technology and being creative in finding better solutions."

Of the five projects three have reached due diligence stage, with organisations interested in taking them further.

The project teams consisted of three to four members, including one private sector entrepreneur. They were drawn from government agencies likely to be involved in delivering the solutions – including people from Statistics NZ, the Ministry for Primary Industries, Education New Zealand and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment.

Simpson says his team consisted of himself and two other Statistics NZ people (a user interface designer and a digital product manager) and a private sector entrepreneur.

"Driven by the needs of the customers we were talking to, and by our desire to truly remove the pain points they were experiencing, we continually narrowed our focus until we arrived at the Shoppin concept. Shoppin is a tool to help retail and hospitality businesses decide if a location will be suitable to set up shop.

"Information to help make this decision existed but was spread across government departments and used overly complex language. Shoppin brings data together in one place to make it easy for people to use," Simpson says.

Shoppin combines commercial property information with freely available government held and private sector data about the people and areas that those properties are in.

Shoppin is currently undertaking due diligence with Statistics New Zealand who have indicated strong interest in it.

The other two MVPs from the R9 Accelerator that are proceeding are:

- **Vizbot**, a web application that will make the building consents process more efficient. It works with existing council systems and processes to give agents, such as builders and architects, and building owners more visibility of the status of their building consent application. Several councils, including Taupo District and Queenstown Lakes District councils, have expressed interest in it.
- **Nexus Marketplace** is an online service that will help businesses find government APIs (application program interfaces), which connect computer

systems to allow them to share data. It will help government make decisions about developing new APIs. This service is of interest to several government agencies.

Not all the project teams got their focus right the first time. The EasyComply team started off looking at a solution for making it easier for horticulture and viticulture businesses to find seasonal workers, but they found that those industries are influenced by social and economic factors that their digital solution could not address. Halfway through the 12-week process, the team refocused its efforts on improving the employees' application process for essential skills visas by simplifying language and providing in-context help. The lessons from this project are with Immigration New Zealand.

Learning

Simpson likes the lean, start-up methodology applied by the R9 Accelerator Project. "It's all about getting something out there and learning from customer interaction with the product. This is how government should be working. Sure there's an element of risk and you have to be prepared to fail. But you can fail fast and fail cheap, not take two years only to find you haven't met the industry need."

Bardsley says the Government Procurement Unit at the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment is



The Shoppin project team at the R9 Accelerator Demo Day (Graeme Simpson far right).

interested in using this methodology as part of the wider government's tool kit.

"It's true we have a limited resource and need to look at equipping ourselves in a different way to generate better outcomes. Use of the accelerator process and private sector involvement in solutions are one way to do that."

An R9 Accelerator Two is in the pipeline for early next year. Improvements from the first trial include:

- A different process to select the project teams, possibly initiated from a start-up weekend later this year for public servants and the private sector interested in particular problems.
- A greater level of agency support

and sponsorship of the projects from inception.

- Potential for some projects to be realised and funded by the private sector.

"I think there is a community of people across the public sector who are well suited to this way of working. Accelerator is a glimpse of what the public sector might be – innovative, customer-focused, involved in co-design and co-production, and energetic. We need to get more of that excitement across the public sector," Bardsley says.

Find out more about the Result 9 Accelerator and the Accelerator teams' products and experience at: www.mbie.govt.nz/what-we-do/better-for-business

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