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Start Small and Get Results Sooner

Best Practice Articles

Features to Consider

Start Small

Getting Started with Creating a WIC Online Application

Many of the state agencies whose work informed the WIC Online Application Toolkit had one thing in common when they were developing their online applications: they started small.

"Starting small" means focusing on delivering *something* of value now rather than waiting to deliver *everything* later. Starting small reduces the traditional risks in launching new software. Upfront costs are low because no large software contract or change order has to be purchased and development time is shorter. How state agencies have "started small" with online applications varies. Some state agencies used popular, pre-approved form building tools to create a simple form. Others had in-house technologists who quickly built one. Very few integrated their forms into the MIS in the beginning, though that is a long-term goal for most.

Regardless of the approach, creating a simple form can help state agencies deliver immediate value to WIC applicants and staff. It also allows state agencies to learn by doing. By starting with a real online form, even if it's not yet a full WIC application, applicants and staff can give valuable feedback. State agencies can use this feedback to decide what changes to make and which features to add based on what users need. This process repeats as state agencies iteratively add more functionality and continue to adapt the form into a fully functional application based on feedback over time.

Below are steps to consider when planning how to "start small" with an online application.

1. Identify a Product Owner

A product owner is the key leader for any software project in government. They set the direction for the product and are empowered to make decisions based on feedback from the groups they work with, including the people who will use the product. Product ownership shouldn't be confused with a more common term in government, project management. A project manager makes sure work gets *done*; a product owner makes sure the *right* work gets done. For more information, read the "Key Principles ⤷" section of 18F's De-risking Guide ⤷. To find a product owner for an online application, look for someone who:

1. Is trusted to collect information and make decisions about the product, with the understanding that they may need to seek higher-level clearance before releases.
2. Is familiar with the WIC certification process and pain points that affect WIC applicants and local agency staff.
3. Is skilled at collecting and prioritizing feedback from applicants and staff.
4. Understands program policy and technological constraints.

2. Select an approach to the application software

Once the product owner is in place, they can evaluate the options for creating an online application. They can:

1. Find out if the state agency already has any approved commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) form builder tools that they can use as a starting point.
2. Consider procuring new software or building custom software if the state agency does not already have any approved products that would work.
3. Evaluate application feature options using the recommendations in "Features to Consider When Building WIC Online Applications."
4. Make sure the software fulfills the state agency's security requirements and WIC confidentiality requirements. A WIC online application will collect sensitive personal information from applicants. The product owner should include the appropriate state agency security and privacy staff in the software selection process to ensure that the software and its terms and conditions will meet all security and privacy requirements.

3. Design the form

Use the Model WIC Application in this toolkit to save time planning what questions the form will include and how they will be worded. Consider the minimum set of features and questions that will be needed for launch and what can be saved for later iterations. Translate the text into the languages that will be included at launch, using the Model WIC Application in Spanish, if Spanish is needed.

4. Test the form

Make sure to test the draft form with WIC applicants and local agency staff to get their feedback and find any issues. Test the process of filling out and submitting the application using different browsers and devices, including error messages, data validation, and confirmation messages.

5. Establish processes to integrate the form into WIC staff's work

An online application changes how families apply for WIC and how WIC staff work. It's important to consider all aspects of how the online application will operate. Consider how the information submitted in the form will be routed to the right local agencies, how they will be notified of submissions, and what steps they will need to take to review and process applications in accordance with processing standards. Be sure to consider how out of state and ineligible applications will be handled. Work with local agencies to develop these standards and processes, and include appropriate training so staff feel comfortable with the online application process.

6. Publish the form

Decide where the form will go on the state agency website and how visitors will navigate to it. Place it prominently on the website so that visitors see

it quickly. Consider the ways existing outreach methods might link to the online application.

7. Collect feedback and iterate

Regularly collect feedback and review analytics to improve the form over time and make sure it is working for users, including both applicants and staff. Incrementally add more functionality, such as integration with other systems, over time based on needs and priorities.

Starting small and using an iterative approach will help state agencies get started quickly with online applications and begin improving the experience for applicants and staff right away. Enhancing an online application gradually over time will reduce risk and cost and make sure its development is guided by staff and participant needs.

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