3 Tips for Joining California's Agile Government Vendor Pool

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California is preparing to expand its agile vendor pool from 11 spots to 30, which means 19 new companies will soon be added to the state's list of pre-qualified contractors that provide user-centric design and agile software development services.

Such work is centered around an oft-discussed principle of tech culture: making the world a better, more efficient place, and competition for spots could be tight. California Department of Technology officials said in December 2016 that about 50 vendors expressed interest and attended an informational webinar on the subject.

With this in mind, companies seeking to be chosen for the pool would do well to prepare, and what better way than to learn from one of the 11 companies already in? This was CivicActions' motivation for holding a webinar titled "How CivicActions Earned a Spot on the California Agile Government Pool." CivicActions, an agile development company, was selected in August 2016 on the strength of a prototype it built for the California Health and Human Services Agency.

Developers, project members and designers who worked on that prototype detailed what CivicActions did to create it, doling out advice for others hoping to achieve this

same feat. The one-hour presentation was packed with valuable info, and the following are three tips that stood out.

1. Time

Much of the advice given by CivicActions was organizational in nature. The company built its prototype during a half dozen two-day sprints, a much faster pace than its usual two-week sprints process. To achieve productivity amid less time, the team set rigid schedules and kept to them, said Rob Read, a strategic consultant for CivicActions who moderated much of the webinar. The overall method for success "was to hunker down and follow their process to a tee."

Each two-day sprint began with a planning meeting in which priorities were set. After the two days were over, they held a demo, prioritized what needed to be done or improved, and repeated the process. It was tempting, Read noted, to continue working after two days, but in the name of order and efficiency, CivicActions stuck to its process, keeping work concise and planning active.

"I've used this process of very compressed sprint cycles on a number of government challenges," he said.

2. People

One advantage CivicActions had was that the team had lined up users of the existing government service in advance. During the first sprint, the team was already able to interview the people who mattered most: actual users. Jen Harris, a user experience designer for CivicActions, emphasized the value such interviews provided.

Harris said the conversations they had with caseworkers and foster parents gave focus and guidance to the team's eventual goals.

"Without direct communication with these people who are very familiar with this system, we would have been designing in the dark," Harris said.

3. Documentation

Despite the intense pace of work, the team also diligently documented its work. During the webinar they listed practical reasons for this as well as some that had more to do with demonstrating potential to do work later.

The reality, Read said, was that time and security clearance limitations prevents companies applying for government work from building actual functional software. Instead, they must act as if they're making something real, displaying as they do an ability to be agile and a broad understanding that they have what it takes to deliver software in the environment that the state will be looking for.

"Strive for real, if limited, utility in the little bit of space you have," said Read.

More detailed information about the webinar, as well as CivicActions' prototype project, can be found here.

http://www.govtech.com/civic/3-Tips-for-Joining-Californias-Agile-Government-Vendor-Pool.html