Redesigning the Visa Process

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> How can we refine immigration pathways and improve them through the use of modern technology?

Applicants are often overwhelmed by the multiple agencies that play a role in processing their immigration application. We can minimize confusion by eradicating the paper based system and implementing a much simpler and accurate process that is completely digital.

The Challenge: Every year, the Department of Homeland Security's U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) processes millions of immigration requests. This results in long waiting periods for applicants who have little visibility into the status of their applications. USCIS wanted to modernize the process. They began a 5 year engagement with a technology vendor to create the Electronic Immigration System.

The project ran into a handful of issues:
- The project scope was too large.
- The proprietary technology adopted was too complex and inflexible.
- Releases happened years after the project began.

The agency was heavily reliant on specific vendors and proprietary technologies that proved costly and difficult to customize to meet USCIS' product requirements.

The solution: In restarting the project, USCIS leadership changed the way they did business. The team embraced an agile, iterative style of product development that allowed the agency to design and deploy functionality more quickly to respond to user needs.

In order for the team to effectively support this agile development style, USCIS engaged with multiple vendors instead of using one large contract with a single vendor.

USCIS also conducted deep research on their customers that led them to re-imagine the end-to-end immigrant experience well beyond the core actions of filing and processing requests. They began to redesign the immigrant experience around people, not form numbers.

Implementations:
- **Build services using agile and iterative practices.** In the new system, USCIS chose two high-volume services and focused on rapidly digitizing them using an agile development process.
- **Structure budgets and contracts to support delivery.** The USCIS CIO spearheaded an innovative contracting approach, having replaced a single large vendor with multiple contractors working together and competing for business.
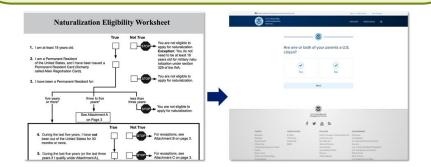- **Implement robust monitoring and incident response.** USDS led an initiative to create a rapid response procedure for troubleshooting major incidents such as service outages.
- **Rely on automated tests to increase development speed.** Good automated test coverage allows the team to verifiably demonstrate the system is working as intended.

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