



Innovation engine powers a federal agency

CHALLENGE

A large U.S. federal agency, through its network of hundreds of entities around the world, is responsible for facilitating strong international relationships and advancing democratic values. It also ensures the safety of American government workers around the world and provides services to expedite business operations.

To do that, its global workforce needs a reliable flow of a wide range of goods and services—from providing medical supplies for health units and cars for transporting personnel, to providing staff their office equipment and mail from back home. To help support these efforts, employees use an integrated logistics management system, which was created and implemented with the help of Accenture in 1999 by combining 27 retired legacy IT systems into one enterprise platform.

The system is the backbone of the agency's global supply chain, used by 197,000 agency and interagency personnel in 270 locations. Every year, \$10 billion worth of purchases are ordered, procured, delivered and tracked through the system. To date, the system has generated more than \$1 billion in cumulative cost savings for the agency and taxpayers.

The system was a catalyst that pioneered innovation at the agency, paving the way for cloud computing and automation. After years of success, the agency set out to reimagine what the next generation supply chain system might look like. It defined a vision, one where system advances would rival commercial industry counterparts and support the changing needs of its stakeholders.

The agency wanted to achieve this vision by disrupting past thinking and approaches. Considering the pace of change during the last ten years, the agency knew it needed to innovate even faster over the next ten.

WHAT ACCENTURE DID

Rather than developing a lengthy plan that might become irrelevant as the mission's needs and technology capabilities evolved, the agency opted for a more dynamic solution—an innovation engine.

The agency and Accenture came together to create an Innovation Hub, a dedicated space at the Accenture Federal Digital Studio optimized to foster innovation and continually bring emerging capabilities forward. The first of its kind in the federal marketplace, this Innovation Hub enables the agency to ideate, design and test disruptive, boundary-pushing ideas—including artificial intelligence (AI), optical character recognition (OCR) and next generation UI/UX. Using a rapid prototyping model, the agency can quickly prove the desirability, feasibility and viability of cutting-edge solutions for actual customer needs.

The rapid prototyping model begins with the ideas pipeline, a collection of disruptive ideas generated from users and team members, client counterparts in Washington, DC, and Accenture specialists. These blended teams pitch ideas in an “innovation contest” format to the program lead, who selects the best ones for rapid prototyping at the Innovation Hub.

Once an idea is selected, designers create prototypes in four-to-eight-week sprints, and then pass a blueprint to the tech team for a four-week rapid build. Then, the cross-functional team unveils end-state prototypes and presents business cases to the lead client executive, with a recommendation to scale or scrap the

idea. Ideas are continually brought forward, and the prototyping cycle repeats itself, keeping innovation at the forefront.

Among those ideas that advanced through the vetting process is the agency's first-ever AI-powered chatbot for Help Desk inquiries. Partnering with Google, the team identified high volume topic areas (after digitally combing through tens of thousands of previous help desk tickets and phone calls) and created five unique “Dialog-flows” in just four weeks. Now this virtual agent is poised to enable faster and better customer service while reducing the number of agency employees needed on the support desk.

Another winning idea to come out of the Innovation Hub is a piece of scanning equipment with optical character recognition (OCR) capabilities that “reads” the information on thousands of letters and packages that go through the agency's internal post office. Designers started with a cardboard mock-up and ended with a powerful machine that will sort and route mail for speedy and accurate delivery to employees, wherever they are.

Finally, the procurement portal prototype smooths interactions with outside vendors that provide products and services to the agency. This innovation turned an outdated, manual, decentralized process into an online collaboration space for the agency and its partners, where information can be exchanged in real time (and no one needs to fax invoices).





PEOPLE AND CULTURE

The Innovation Hub fostered a safe space for clients to test bold ideas and make them come to life by working alongside the agency in an R&D lab powered by the Digital Studio, with minimal financial investment.

The cultural change sparked by the Innovation Hub is a renewed emphasis on agility, innovation and co-creation from inside the organization. Through the entire process, a joint team of agency employees and Accenture experts work together, using human-centered design to solve for customer needs from start to finish. The close partnership produced better solutions and excited client executives about the potential of these innovations. As a result, client executives are now advancing ideas that they had contemplated for years but had been wary to act upon. Since the teams have embraced an agile mindset approach, their minimally viable products can provide immediate value to people while they are continually redesigned to meet even more complex challenges.

The Innovation Hub has allowed the agency to focus on its mission as it actively engages in its own transformation. The program lead believes that “[The Innovation Hub] really helps us put people at the heart of the mission and helps us deliver innovation exponentially faster.”

The Hub creates a constant flow of ideas by tapping into Accenture’s vast resources and innovation ecosystem of thought leaders, industry experts, designers and partners who work together to enhance the ideation, prototyping and scaling of innovations and deliver the best value. The Innovation Hub has inspired other groups at this agency and other federal agencies to consider creating a similar space, igniting a culture of innovation throughout government.

VALUE DELIVERED

Understanding the needs of a global workforce, as well as having a wide network of experts and human-centered designers, has been crucial to the success of this project.

By sparking innovation and bringing it to life quickly, the Innovation Hub is vastly improving the system, which in turn improves the lives of people doing critical work around the globe. The customer base of roughly 200,000 comprises not just personnel, but also their families, and the network of businesses and organizations that work with the agency.

The agency is continuing to expand the ethos and capabilities of the Innovation Hub on the road, hosting co-creation sessions with clients and customers around the world. No longer a single prototyping

shop, it is an innovation multiplier. A recent event at Accenture's Liquid Studio in Madrid, Spain, for instance, brought together 25 stakeholders, most of whom were agency personnel from Europe and Africa. Over three days, the participants defined their vision and priorities for the near-and long-term, and even built a prototype for a new mobile app.

Whether the Innovation Hub is at work in Washington, DC, halfway around the world or virtually, it brings together new ideas and cutting-edge technologies in the most human way possible.

