# Dynamic Learning Platform: ICF's Agile approach to learning

icf.com

## Executive summary

In 2014, spurred in part by end-user challenges with healthcare.gov, the federal government launched the U.S. Digital Service (USDS) to solicit new ideas, solutions, and talent to improve how the U.S. government builds and buys digital services—and overhaul the level of service provided to U.S. citizens and businesses. Working with the Office of Federal Procurement Policy (OFPP), USDS solicited proposals for solutions that would strengthen government's digital services acquisition expertise, reduce the risk of failed acquisitions and systems, and save taxpayer dollars. ICF's Dynamic Learning Platform was selected to directly address these challenges.

This platform includes a combination of instructional strategies that move participants from theoretical knowledge and understanding to demonstrated learning, advocacy, and on-the-job application. The program uses an Agile approach to learning that serves as a signal for the software development methodology its graduates need to understand.

The pilot program concluded on March 31, 2016 with 28 participants. Since then, 225+ contracting officers from more than 35 federal agencies have completed our program and earned their FAC-C-DS certification.

**This flexible solution is helping how the U.S. government delivers services to citizens and businesses and leverages an Agile approach for complex digital training needs.**

## The challenge

The launch of healthcare.gov spotlighted a need for changes in federal procurement practices. At the time, there wasn't adequate flexibility to implement modern digital service solutions. U.S. government agencies had to find new ways to train their workforces to keep pace with both technological change and increasing citizen demand for federal digital services. Acquisition professionals needed to develop a solid understanding of modern technology and services to meet those demands.

Federal procurement practices further complicated this challenging situation. Contracting officers' warrants come tethered with strict personal accountability and responsibility, thus making some reluctant to attempt creative and innovative practices. Even those contracting officers willing to innovate may experience resistance within their organizations. This can make it difficult to equip staff with the knowledge and skills needed to act as trusted business advisors and serve as catalysts for change.

## The ICF solution

In addressing the U.S. government's significant challenges, ICF developed a new learning approach with the U.S. Digital Service (USDS). Improving upon the traditional instructional design approach, ICF's Dynamic Learning Platform blends the typically segmented, step-wise design and delivery phases. This method uses an iterative approach in which instructional designers write subsequent sections of learning content while delivering earlier sections to ensure the training rapidly and effectively meets evolving learner needs. A rigorous assessment process and learner analytics drive the design of engaging and interactive learning experiences that are adaptable to participants' abilities and knowledge.

Course materials are delivered to participants using a customized Canvas-based platform in two-week iterations combined into four-week releases. Continuous feedback—the hallmark of Agile development—informs real-time adjustments to course content and pacing, and allows for individualization of the learning experience.

Several key aspects of the program made it a standout to help the USDS resolve its challenges:

### Agile approach to learning

ICF's Dynamic Learning Platform offers a rigorous assessment process, continuous feedback, and learner analytics that drive dynamic and relevant content design. This approach to customized learning ensures adaptability to participant needs to inspire engagement and relevance. It also assists in scalability and sustainability, which in turn reduces the need for costly course revisions—a key budget-planning factor for resource-strapped organizations. What's more, the solution serves as a signal for behavior change, using the same innovative, flexible design principles that participants will procure for future U.S. government digital initiatives.

### Mix of learning modalities

By accommodating a mix of learning modalities, ICF's solution reinforces habit creation and promotes critical thinking to move participants from awareness of concepts to practical application, with real-world results. ICF structured the platform to allow participants to learn a concept, practice it in the classroom, test the new ideas and behaviors in the workplace, and receive support from facilitators as needed. Throughout the program, participants apply these new learnings to a "live" digital services assignment—a group project that partners them with agency professionals to solve a current acquisition challenge. Consequently, participants gain technical knowledge as well as consulting and change leadership skills so that they can serve as the primary catalysts for change in how the government procures digital services.

### Learning portal

The Dynamic Learning Platform requires cataloguing large amounts of learning materials to make them easily accessible to participants and to provide a secure space for discussion and collaboration. Participants and program faculty use a Canvas-based learning portal as a single source for all program materials. The portal allows participants to easily track their progress and check the status of their assignments and grades, as well as share documents and host group-specific meetings for their teamwork. As it is also fully responsive on mobile devices, participants can learn at the point of need.

**On recent exit surveys, over 80% of participants indicated that they are committed to applying what they learned to their work.**

For more information, contact:

**Faith Powers**

Faith.Powers@icf.com   +1.703.934.3708

 twitter.com/ICF

 linkedin.com/company/icf-international

 facebook.com/ThisIsICF

## The results

With an emphasis on application, demonstrated learning, and transformational culture change, Dynamic Learning Platform participants are equipped with the knowledge and skills to serve as the primary catalysts for change within their U.S. government organizations.

ICF's pilot program with USDS concluded on March 31, 2016, and 28 participants successfully completed it. A post-pilot survey, conducted three months after the program's conclusion, found that 83% of survey respondents noticed a difference in their job behavior as a result of what they learned in the program. At the same time, 72% of respondents indicated they were either initiating innovative methods and strategies or looking for ways to initiate innovation in the digital acquisition process.

Since then, 225+ contracting officers from more than 35 federal agencies have completed our program and earned their FAC-C-DS certification. On recent exit surveys, over 80% of participants indicated that they are committed to applying what they learned to their work. Feedback includes:

- "I have a new level of satisfaction and enjoyment with my career, and feel like I've had the 'ceiling' removed and am not constrained in my approach to new ideas or techniques and the value I can provide."

- "I think the program was informative and practical, and I do feel that I have the knowledge and confidence to be able to assist our customers with future digital services acquisitions."

## Response to COVID-19

During the onset of the COVID-19 epidemic, ICF had four cohorts (75+ participants) still running through our program. To allow participants to continue the program with minimal to no disruption, we rapidly adapted our in-person classroom sessions to virtual classroom sessions. We integrated tools such as Miro with Zoom/Adobe Connect to mimic the classroom setting and used features such as breakout rooms, polling questions, chat, and raise hand to maintain participants' level of engagement. To date, we have received positive participant feedback from our virtual classroom sessions.