



Crowdsourcing Minnesota's "Unsession" *1,200 Ways to Make Government Better*

Category: Emerging and Innovative Technology
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Executive Summary

The Unsession project, initiated by the Governor of Minnesota, Mark Dayton, was the first-ever citizen social engagement event and the first all-State agency employee ideation event in the State of Minnesota. The driving force behind the Governor's Unsession project was to identify ways to make state government better, faster, simpler and more efficient for Minnesotans.

The following quote from [Governor Dayton's website](#) explains it succinctly: "Governor Dayton dubbed the 2014 Legislative Session the "Unsession" – a first-of-its-kind effort to make state government better, faster, simpler, and more efficient for Minnesotans. The Governor wanted to improve government services, shorten wait times, eliminate old and outdated rules, and undo anything else that makes state government nearly impossible for people to understand."

How best to identify those improvements? Ask employees and citizens! The challenge was how to accomplish that in a very short timeframe.

The Governor's Office quickly needed innovative ways to reach Minnesota citizens and all 38,000 State of Minnesota employees. Dayton's office decided to use the media and the Governor's newsletter to promote the Unsession in two ways:

- Traditional information gathering at the Minnesota State Fair.
- Online crowdsourcing tools to tap the greatest amount of people in the shortest length of time.

To help with online crowdsourcing, the Governor's Office enlisted the support of the MN.IT Services Innovation Program that served as the key resource for both online campaigns for state employees and the general public. Using an open innovation platform would encourage participation and collaboration, and increase transparency and openness.

MN.IT's Innovation Program staff had an extremely short timeline (14 days) to set up the online crowdsourcing campaigns for the general public and for state employees. By using the repeatable innovation process they had recently developed, the program team was able to create campaigns quickly and easily. This innovation process was designed to engage passionate individuals in solution development. The Innovation team created a center of excellence and model for idea crowdsourcing within Minnesota state government. And it provided the perfect tools to make the Unsession a success.

The results?

The Unsession crowdsourcing generated over 1,200 ideas, both big and small, to make government work better. The Unsession resulted in very tangible deliverables: the 2014 repeal of 1,175 outdated laws; faster permitting reforms; simpler, more consistent taxes; and an executive order promoting plain language in state government. These were real, visible results that benefitted Minnesotans around the state.

Supporting information can be found on these websites:

<http://mn.gov/governor/unsession>

http://www.twincities.com/localnews/ci_25843305/minnesota-unsession-dumps-1-175-obsolete-silly-laws

<http://www.startribune.com/lifestyle/homegarden/256215931.html?page=all&prepage=1&c=y#continue>

Business Problem and Solution Description

The business problem:

The aim of the Unsession was to restore the original intent of Minnesota's annual legislative sessions. Other than responding to emergencies and passing a bonding bill, the Governor thought that even-year sessions in non-budget years should be devoted to "eliminating unnecessary or redundant laws, rules and regulations" and otherwise making state government more efficient.

Sources: <https://www.minnpost.com/politics-policy/2013/02/unsession-aims-restore-original-intent-annual-legislative-sessions> and <http://www.mprnews.org/story/2013/10/19/politics/dayton-legislative-unsession-could-lead-to-historic-results>

The primary goals of the Governor's Unsession project were:

- To identify ways to make state government better, faster, simpler and more efficient for Minnesotans.
- To engage the largest number of citizens and state employees possible to generate a reasonable number of actionable ideas.
- To gather initial ideas within a very short timeframe to allow implementation and tangible results to be realized before the end of the next legislative session.

The challenge was finding the right environment, the right tools and engaging the right audiences.

The solution:

The solution was to use the repeatable innovation process created by MN.IT's Innovations Program. The process capitalized on ideation and crowdsourcing to engage passionate individuals in solution development. The Innovation team has provided a center of excellence and model for idea crowdsourcing within Minnesota state government.

Ideation is the creative process of generating, developing, and communicating new ideas. Thanks to growing connectivity, it is now easier than ever for individuals to collectively contribute—whether with ideas, time, expertise, or funds—to a project or cause. This collective mobilization is called crowdsourcing. Crowdsourcing takes ideation to the next level, and engages a 'crowd' or group for a common goal -- often innovation, problem solving, or efficiency.

The Innovation Program had been using idea crowdsourcing campaigns for some time. As an agency, MN.IT had embraced the use of creative and unconventional tools, such as idea crowdsourcing and civic engagement, to capture ideas and expertise from broad and diverse communities about how to improve information technology services. Using cloud-based software, the program has held a series of ideation campaigns. These campaigns actively connected 2,100 MN.IT Services employees located across the state in more than 90 locations.

These crowdsourcing tools provide open forums for idea generation and collaboration, aimed at improving organizational efficiency and generating positive outcomes for Minnesotans through the creative application of information technology. The ideation approach for engaging and connecting people helps bridge gaps in understanding on polarizing issues, as well as harness creativity from a wide spectrum of backgrounds, insights and expertise.

And it provided the perfect environment to make the Unsession a huge success.

Elements of the solution:

- The Unsession leveraged MN.IT's existing ideation software license to accomplish these campaigns. MN.IT had just finished their first campaign, so our experience was fresh and top of mind. There were two campaigns run on overlapping timeframes; one for state employees and one for public input:
 - The public Unsession crowdsourcing campaign required no login, and generated 442 ideas (click on Unsession Suggestion under Archived Events to view)
<http://unsessionuggestion.ideascale.com/>
 - The state employee campaign required users to authenticate as state employees to participate.
- The nature and concept of the Unsession had a very organic, "grassroots" feel, and the crowdsourcing campaigns needed to convey that appeal. The crowdsourcing process and ideation tool were a perfect fit, being extremely user-friendly with the familiarity of popular social media applications.

Cost

- There was no intrinsic cost to the crowdsourcing campaigns, because the Unsession was able to use MN.IT's enterprise software license. Four MN.IT Innovation Program staff provided assistance during a very short two week window, so resource costs were minimal as well.
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Significance

For government, state employees and citizens:

- Rarely does state government dedicate the time and resources to encourage employees to think outside the box and challenge established practices, as well as invite citizens to submit their ideas and join in the conversation on how to improve state government. The crowdsourcing model strips away the layers of hierarchy inherent in government, affording everybody participating an equal voice in addressing problems and proposing solutions.

For MN.IT Services and other state agencies:

- MN.IT Services has used a crowdsourcing solution to yield almost 300 ideas and almost 1,100 comments with over 50% employee participation rate during two employee idea campaigns.
- Several other MN state agencies also make use of the crowdsourcing technology through MN.IT's enterprise license to conduct their own agency campaigns with both employees and external partners.
- Top ideas gathered through crowdsourcing resulted in increased participation and partnership in civic engagement coding events such as Hack for MN and Capitol Code, collaboration with the MN Interagency Council to End Homelessness on using a service design approach in ending Veteran's Homelessness, and development of a mobile and responsive web design reference guide and State of MN mobile app site found on the [Innovation Program website](#).
- Our efforts have also led to providing a center of excellence and model for idea crowdsourcing within Minnesota state government with a repeatable innovation process that engages passionate individuals in solution development.

Stakeholder groups

- Minnesota Governor Mark Dayton and the Governor's office
- State agencies
- Private sector businesses
- Service Sectors (health, public safety, transportation, etc.)
- Citizens as service customers, citizens as taxpayers
- State of Minnesota employees
- Legislators
- Other government leadership

Alignment with gubernatorial priorities

- Governor Dayton wanted to improve government services, shorten wait times, eliminate old and outdated rules, and undo anything else that makes state government nearly impossible for people to understand.
- Another initiative was to increase transparency and openness, which was definitely demonstrated in the Unsession campaigns.

Alignment with NASCIO's top 10 priorities for State CIOs

- The Unsession used innovative technology to foster openness and public trust.
- Using social crowdsourcing campaigns levels the playing field and provides an open, transparent forum for supporting innovation and communication within state government and with our partners, stakeholders and citizens.
- Efforts like the Unsession help to strengthen cross-boundary collaboration, solutions and relationships.

Benefits of the Project

The overarching benefits for citizens, state employees and government as a whole were the transformation of government and transparency of government operations.

During the 2014 Legislative Session, the Governor and the Legislature enacted over 1,100 provisions as a direct result of the Unsession campaigns. The areas listed below are just a few examples.

- **Permitting Reform**

Job-creating business permits took too long for approval, up to 150 days (5 months). Now, approximately 11,000 of the 15,000 environmental permit requests received by the Pollution Control Agency and the Department of Natural Resources will be able to issue environmental permits to businesses within the goal of 90 days (150 days for more complex permits). That's an improvement of 97 percent for job-creating business permits.

- **Simpler Taxes**

State tax law was aligned with new federal credits and deductions for students, families, and seniors. It also simplified filing returns by conforming state tax law to changes in the federal tax code. Those revisions "made tax forms easier to understand and less time-consuming to prepare" for more than 1 million Minnesota taxpayers.

- **Eliminating Unneeded, Outdated Laws**

It's no longer a crime in Minnesota to carry fruit in an illegally sized container. The state's telegraph regulations are gone. It's no longer a crime to drive a car in neutral (if you can figure out how to do it.) And the state won't regulate the size and color of bug deflectors.

Thousands of pages of Minnesota laws were filled with outdated, unenforceable laws like these, and technical jargon that was nearly impossible to understand.

To make government easier to understand, Governor Dayton and the Legislature eliminated over 1,100 obsolete, redundant, and incomprehensible statutes. This would also require less effort and cost savings by reducing the number of laws that State government agencies are responsible for implementing, interpreting, and enforcing.

- **Plain Language Initiative**

In March 2014, Governor Dayton signed an Executive Order directing all state agencies to use "plain language", an effort that has taken hold across the nation. Using plain language simplifies the written word with commonly-used language, clear and concise sentences, and information that is presented in a format that is easy-to-understand for Minnesotans. Since the Executive Order was signed, thousands of state employees have received plain language training and numerous plain language projects are underway across the administration.

- **Other Unsession benefits**

Another new law cuts in half the amount of time businesses must retain employment records.

Legislators launched an initiative that got rid of more than 30 advisory boards, councils and task forces that had outlived their usefulness.

Financial Return on Investment

There were no tangible financial returns to this project. However, there were cost-savings and cost avoidance due to reductions in the amount of time and effort required in the work of state employees.

Non-Financial Return on Investment

- The use of idea crowdsourcing technology and processes was one way in which the Governor's Office connected with State of MN employees and Minnesota citizens to solicit ideas and comments. The Unsession itself resulted in 1,175 outdated laws repealed in 2014, as well as permitting reform, simpler taxes and a plain language initiative.
- The ideation approach for engaging and connecting people through unconventional mediums helps bridge gaps in understanding on polarizing issues, as well as harness creativity from a wide spectrum of backgrounds, insights and expertise.
- The Unsession advanced public policy goals of improving government to make it run better, faster and more efficiently.
- Obsolete laws, redundant process and duplicative efforts were reduced or eliminated to streamline government.

Measurement

Unsession campaign reach, engagement and effectiveness was measured using the built-in tools within the idea crowdsourcing application. The campaigns garnered 1,200 ideas and 2,600 related comments. From those, the Unsession resulted in 1,100 provisions, and the repeal of 1,175 antiquated laws.