



MONTANA BUSINESS NAVIGATOR



State of Montana

Ron Baldwin, Chief Information Officer

Digital Government: Government to Business (G to B)

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Completed: August 2015



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Montana has often been called one big small town. The feeling of community, support, and a sense of belonging are part of what makes Montana a great place to live, work and connect. From Baker to Wolf Point and everywhere in between, technology in the digital age allows us to connect like never before. Technology is also a vital component in enabling the Governor's initiatives, such as the Main Street Montana project.

Governor Steve Bullock initiated the Main Street Montana Project in early 2013. The goal of the project was to create a dynamic private-public partnership to build and implement a business plan for Montana by Montanans. The Governor's Office of Economic Development led the development of the Business Navigator under the directive of the Main Street Montana Project.

Andy Shirliff, Small Business Advocate for the Montana Governor's Office of Economic Development, was appointed by Governor Steve Bullock in 2013. Shirliff began working closely with Governor Bullock to identify opportunities for small businesses. One of those opportunities was to streamline the process for entrepreneurs wanting to do business in Montana.

One of the guiding principles at the State of Montana Information Technology Services Division (SITSD) is to improve business. With this principle as a roadmap, SITSD worked to incorporate existing technology and strong partnerships with state agencies, private industry leaders, and entrepreneurs to help create the Montana Business Navigator.

The Navigator is an efficient and accessible online service for entrepreneurs looking to start a business in Montana. The Navigator guides prospective business owners and entrepreneurs through a streamlined process of identifying the necessary registrations, licenses, and permits needed to start a business in Montana.

It takes a user through an initial set of questions to determine the feasibility of starting a new business. Step by step, it provides resources, mentoring, and tips on writing a business plan among other tools and resources.

On average it only takes users 15-30 mins to setup.

Since the Business Navigator site launched, it averages 3,000 visits a month to business.mt.gov/navigator. Close to 300 active businesses are currently using the Navigator. The total cost of the project implementation was around \$40-\$50,000.

CONCEPT

Montana's small businesses are a driving force of our state's growing economy. The Montana Business Navigator is the result of feedback from entrepreneurs and small business owners across the state who told us about the need to streamline information, cut red tape and make it easier to create jobs. The conversations started after hearing from business owners for a need to make the process easier, but also from agencies having trouble directing people on where to go to get started. Under the direction of the Governor's Office of Economic Development, with a focus on better jobs and more effective government, work got underway on creating a solution to streamline the permitting and licensing for business in Montana.

The Montana Business Checklist is an easy to use and powerful service that brings together all of the State of Montana's business permits and licenses to one location. This service helps users navigate through the State of Montana's permitting and licensing, and helps develop businesses into Montana success stories.

The service was developed in a partnership with the Montana Department of Administration, the Montana Governor's Office of Economic Development, as well as with the assistance of several other state agencies including the Secretary of State, Department of Revenue, and the Department of Labor and Industry.

In total, there was collaborative participation by 11 state agencies. In addition, private partners and business stakeholders provided input to create a fully intuitive and comprehensive service.

The approach taken by State Information Technology Services Division workgroups to manage the project was to utilize the Agile Development Methodology. Coordinating information and working with diverse groups and deadlines required flexibility. From an IT perspective, this practice allowed for the team to implement feedback, define requirements and meet the expectations of the project. Collaborating as a team allowed for the backend database to seamlessly integrate with both the employee and public interfaces. Creating an online service that is accessible, intuitive, responsive, and easy to use was the goal. The average user can get setup in around 15 to 30 minutes.

SIGNIFICANCE

Montana business are a cornerstone of our economy. Making it easier for business owners to get the licenses and permits they need has benefits beyond improving government efficiency and accessibility. It also impacts jobs, local and statewide economies. This also saves time and resources for state agencies. Business owners are directed to one location to get everything that they need. Part of why the Business Navigator project was successful was having open dialogue with actual business owners.

To ensure that this service met their needs, small business owners had a seat at the table, working along with stakeholders in government and economic development. "We had great input from actual business owners who gave honest and constructive feedback on ways to improve the service," said Andy Shirliff.

"As a small business owner I appreciate every step that can make the process of starting and expanding a business in Montana more streamlined and user friendly. I really appreciate the effort made by the Office of Economic Development to reach out to seasoned business leaders to help create the Business Navigator. Developed collaboratively, it is a great tool that will only help the small businesses across Montana," explained Sarah Calhoun, Montana entrepreneur and owner of Red Ants Pants in White Sulphur Springs.

Collecting and coordinating complex information with the assistance of several other state agencies and entities was one of the greatest challenges. These coordinated efforts of agency and public and private collaboration, created a strong foundation built on the shared goal of helping businesses.

The result is a service that is efficient, expansive, intuitive and comprehensive.

"We are all very proud of the final product," said John Rogers, Chief Business Development Officer for the State of Montana.

IMPACT

Simplifying and streamlining the way entrepreneurs get the licenses and permits they need addressed specific business challenges through effective government. The collaboration highlighted the importance of public and private partnerships, agencies coming together to support business, and how utilizing existing Information Technology can bring government to the people in an easy to use and accessible way.

Under the direction of the Main Street Montana Project, an initiative to improve business, an unprecedented effort was deployed to foster more meaningful private public partnerships. Roundtables were held in all seven major cities in Montana, as well as smaller towns across the state. Feedback was given through an online outlet from all 56 counties in the state. This information was used in creating the Montana Business Navigator.

Having open dialogue with business input improved customer service and ensure that the project was deployed with no issues in service or with any interruptions. It was well tested by actual business owners and their feedback was implemented.

These strengthened relationships and partnerships inside and outside of state government are an unintended consequence of the Main Street Montana Project, and specifically the Montana Business Navigator.

“The Montana Business Navigator project was a quintessential project that showed how Information Technology can be used to connect people, and information and services,” said Ron Baldwin, State of Montana Chief Information Officer.

One of the questions asked often by potential business owners in the state was where would we start if I was going to start a business? The answer is now the Montana Business Navigator.

Specifically, the Business Navigator performs three functions: 1) it teaches prospective business owners about Montana’s business/regulatory culture, 2) instructs existing Montana entrepreneurs on how to better operate their business and 3) gives owners a checklist and basic outline for starting a business in-state. The Business Navigator also covers what licenses and permits are needed, depending on the business. Users can tailor their checklist based on information given. This simplifies the entire process.

Making it easier to start a business means more time for entrepreneurs to focus on making their ventures a success. And when small businesses are successful, Montana benefits.