

# Ohio. Find IT Here: A Focus on Human-Centered Design

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**STATE:** State of Ohio

**AGENCY:** Ohio Department of Administrative Services

**AWARD CATEGORY:** Cross-Boundary Collaboration & Partnerships

**PROJECT TITLE:** Ohio. Find IT Here: A Focus on Human Centered Design

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## Access Benefits For You and for Your Family

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## Executive Summary

The way humans interact and consume information is consistently evolving. From print news to desktop computers and now to smartphones, now more than ever Ohioans are expecting to be able to quickly access the data they need, when they need it, on whichever device they have available. This shift requires reimagining how government engages with not only state residents, but their own state and county workers as well. Doing that warrants an experience-led, evidence-based methodology that is rooted in human-centered design principles. It is further improved by reaching across the aisle to collaborate with your residents, your assisting organizations and partners, and your agencies.

Over the past year, the Department of Administrative Services (DAS) Ohio Benefits Program partnered with the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) and the Department of Medicaid (ODM), 14 foodbank representatives, three Medicaid assisting organizations, numerous county offices, nearly 500 residents, and a product vendor to focus on a reimagination of how the state engages with Ohioans in pursuit of benefits.

Through these partnerships, the Ohio Benefits Program initiated the work to implement a human-centered design modernization of three websites targeting both internal workers and customers:

- Renovate Benefits.Ohio.Gov, the landing page for Ohioans seeking information about benefits and how to apply.
- Enhance the self-service portal (SSP) to simplify the application process Ohioans use to apply for benefits.
- Create the Ohio Benefits Program Portal to replace outdated sites to centralize resources and materials that support county workers.

When driving through the State of Ohio, you may be welcomed with the tourism slogan, “Ohio. Find it here.” Through an in-depth focus on human-centered design, the Ohio Benefits Program modernized and enhanced three sites to better serve countless Ohioans and the workers that support them to help everyone find exactly what they are looking for.



## Project Narrative

### THE IDEA

The idea behind these three modernization initiatives was to take a closer look at the existing customer facing page, the self-service application process, and the internal site serving county workers to modernize and streamline access to the sought after information. The Ohio Benefits Program team took a human-centered design approach to put information and answers front and center, engaging directly with end users to create an experience that suited their needs.

Enhancing the experience of Ohioans seeking benefits by modernizing government sites is a complex undertaking that involved striking a balance between collecting sufficient personal data to determine eligibility, while still providing an experience that is user-friendly and not overly burdensome. Successfully navigating this delicate balance demanded a comprehensive understanding of not only user needs, their common frustrations, and technological constraints, but also a commitment to human-centered design principles that prioritize simplicity, clarity, and accessibility.

The resources formerly available to internal workers were a combination of various sites that did not require any level of authentication to access. The creation of the new Ohio Benefits Program Portal provides authenticated access to a plethora of resources for county, state, and contract workers in a one-stop shop format, including streamlined access to trainings, news and events, job aids, system improvement updates, dashboard metrics and direct access to state intranet sites. Both the internal and external sites, Benefits.Ohio.Gov and the former Ohio Benefits site, lacked data and analytics related to site visits and user behavior, restricting the ability to continue to engage in a human-centered approach and develop optimizations based on what real Ohioans were facing.

## WHY IT MATTERS

The State of Ohio administers Medicaid to over three million Ohioans and ODJFS administers the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to nearly 1.4 million Ohioans, meaning thousands of households are looking for benefit information, completing applications and asking questions, all being funneled through only 88 County Department of Job and Family Services (CDJFS) offices. CDJFS workers are inundated with calls on top of the heavy caseloads they are already working through. The Ohio Benefits Program sought to alleviate this burden by increasing customer engagement via a renovation of Benefits.Ohio.Gov, providing a simplified and streamlined experience that answered frequent questions up front, serving Ohioans before they needed to dial in.

Creating the authenticated (Figure 1) Ohio Benefits Program Portal provided workers that faced changes to their work during the pandemic with a central location for available resources and materials needed to accomplish their duties and the guarantee of receiving the latest information. The consequences of failing to provide a central platform that requires a log in include noncompliance with state and federal policies and the potential to expose sensitive information.

Collecting too much data or requiring too many steps can discourage users from completing online benefit applications, while collecting too little data or requiring too few steps can result in incomplete applications that require additional time and resources to process. The enhancement of online benefit applications requires a deep knowledge of the latest human-centered design tools and methods, as well as an awareness of the unique challenges posed by government regulations and data privacy requirements.

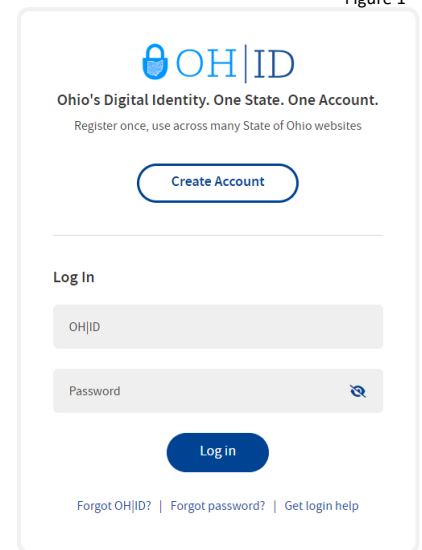
The renovation of both Benefits.Ohio.Gov and the creation of the centralized Ohio Benefits Program Portal through the Innovate Ohio Platform (IOP) allow for the tracking of metrics and user interactions, enabling the Ohio Benefits Program to know how often Ohioans are visiting and what they are looking for once they arrive. The improvements provide additional support to county offices and can ease the in-person and phone traffic for common information requests, while providing it in a mobile-friendly and accessible format.

## WHY IT'S UNIQUE

One of the unique aspects of this project is its focus on user research with Ohioans, rather than blindly applying industry standards and practices. By conducting thorough research and analysis of user needs and behaviors, the team can gain a deeper understanding of the specific pain points and challenges that users face when seeking government assistance. This enables the Ohio Benefits Program to provide an integrated customer experience that is tailored to Ohioans' specific needs, rather than relying on generic or one-size-fits-all solutions. Two of the solutions implemented in this process utilize the IOP, which provides single sign-on access, a standard look and feel, and easy navigation while still ensuring mobility and accessibility.

## WHY IT'S UNIVERSAL

The Ohio Benefits Program prioritized strategies that aligned with a human-centered design focus: legacy modernization, identity and access management and consolidation/optimization. The modernization of legacy systems presents the opportunity to both consolidate and optimize resources and fosters an environment for data sharing and integration across agencies and departments, leading to improved collaboration and communication between different parts of the government. In conjunction with these improvements, user authentication ensures your agencies and departments can securely collaborate with confidence. By prioritizing resident needs and behaviors, and conducting user research and analysis, organizations can gain a deeper understanding of their customers and design solutions that truly meet their needs in a straightforward, timely and user-friendly way.

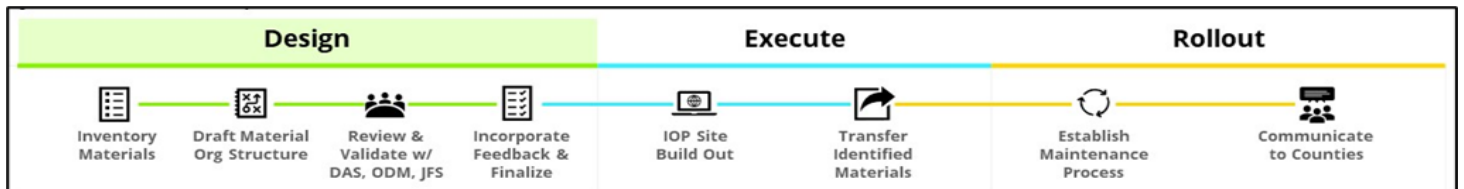


## IMPLEMENTATION: THE ROADMAP

The mission of these modernizations was to improve the delivery of services that promote self-sufficiency, safety and well-being for Ohio’s vulnerable individuals and families through agency, partner, and resident collaboration. The project maintained a human-centered design focus to tailor technology in a way that resonates with Ohioans.

The team’s goal through the Benefits.Ohio.Gov redesign project and the creation of the new Ohio Benefits Program Portal was to implement new and improved platforms that streamlined processes and searches for information and provided end users with simplified navigation while providing accessibility and security, whether they were a resident or worker. Both sites worked to collaborate across agencies to ensure the intended audiences were getting the information they needed in a way that appealed to how they searched for that information, implementing their feedback for a truly human-centered product. Each project was broken into three phases: design, execution, and rollout (Figure 2).

Figure 2



The agencies were involved from start to finish on these projects, through subject matter expert focus groups, design sessions, mock-up reviews, build and development reviews, acting as liaisons across agencies and partners, as well as providing access management testing before launch and rollout to the counties and to Ohioans.

The SSP enhancement project involved a significant investment of time and resources to improve the benefit application process user experience. The project was broken down into three distinct phases - user research, design and development, and testing – spending twelve weeks in each phase. As initial interactions were completed, the team was able to introduce a hybrid Agile methodology that used weekly sprints to deliver small, incremental changes to the design, directly informed by user feedback and testing results. This hybrid approach allowed the Ohio Benefits Program to maintain structure and predictability while incorporating the flexibility and responsiveness of Agile methodologies, resulting in a more efficient and effective development process.

Assessments included observing adoption and end-user data and metrics, determining the length of time it took users to find what they were looking for and soliciting feedback from stakeholders. Additionally, SSP enhancements were assessed through feedback comparisons before and after the enhancements were deployed.

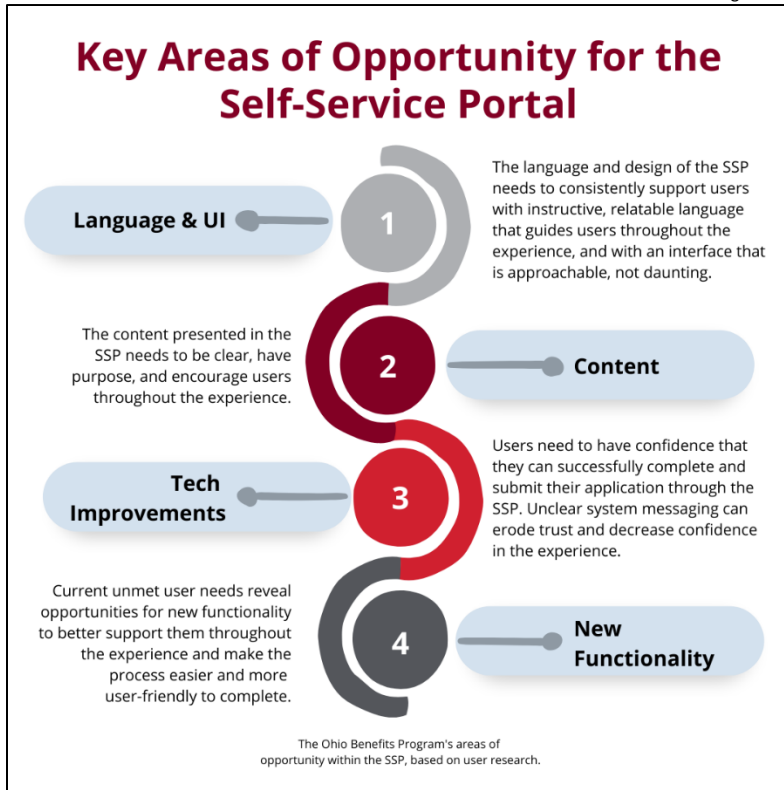
## THE WHO + THE HOW

To truly maintain a human-centered focus, these projects were a large-scale collective collaboration across DAS, ODJFS, ODM, CDJFS, partners of ODM and CDJFS offices, vendors, and Ohioans in a variety of essential roles. State agencies provided operations, business process and policy input, as well as overall project sponsorship. County offices, partners, and county advocates served as the project team’s boots on the ground as they regularly interacted with the Self-Service Portal system and those who apply through its interface. Ohioans were engaged as end users, enhancement testers and key feedback providers for all aspects of the SSP. They shared their pain points and user experiences. The partnership of all these groups allowed for thorough feedback solicitation, in-depth examination of use cases and real-life scenarios, as well as support and participation in overall adoption, dissemination of updates and marketing materials, clarity, and ongoing utilization of these enhanced sites.

Several research methods were used to gather input from the different stakeholder groups. The research began with an initial study using the AI-enabled WEVO platform to collect both qualitative and quantitative input around digital user experiences from 400+ residents. Ethnographic research was conducted in the field, observing, intercepting, and interviewing Ohioans as they sought assistance with the application and renewal process. Targeted focus groups were held with the food banks to identify unmet needs for organizations and applicants. Deep dive diary studies were

conducted with organizations and their applicants to capture detailed logs of their experiences and understand their specific challenges and questions.

Figure 3



This research uncovered **key areas of opportunity** for the SSP, both for the short and long-term, to improve the experience for Ohioans, as illustrated in Figure 3.

After conducting extensive research to identify the pain points in the user experience, a greater challenge emerged in shifting the very mindset in which the team approached the system. It required a paradigm shift from a policy-driven perspective, where the primary focus was ticking all the checkboxes for compliance, to a more holistic, human-centered approach that emphasizes clarity while keeping the person at the end of the application at the forefront.

The Benefits.Ohio.Gov renovation and the optimization of the Ohio Benefits Program Portal were accomplished through the use of the IOP, which employs user experience capabilities that include: ADA compliance, site analytics, customizable features, integration with the state identification and authentication system that allows for single-sign on

and a simplified experience for workers, content first patterns that support findability, a mobile-ready responsive template and components, and user-centric navigation that has customer-focused information architecture. The renovation also took into consideration the comfort of familiar navigation, allowing the team to replicate SSP navigation on the Benefits.Ohio.Gov landing page to easily direct users to their interface in fewer clicks. Through extensive discussion, review and validation with key stakeholders, Benefits.Ohio.Gov was revamped to better suit Ohioans.

The Ohio Benefits Program Portal went through multiple rounds of inventory review and discussion, looking to replace outdated information with current materials and design new engagement options for workers, including micro-learning, videos, web-based training options and dashboards. Once stakeholders were engaged and a decision was made, design sessions and development occurred, creating space to test and ensure that the new navigation truly supported the humans using it. Finally, future planning for three management components was established to ensure the ongoing modernization and innovation of the portal: content management, site access management, and optimization. Processes were designed to guarantee the portal will continue to meet the needs of its users in a friendly, up-to-date, and engaging manner, with quality assurance checks every step of the way.

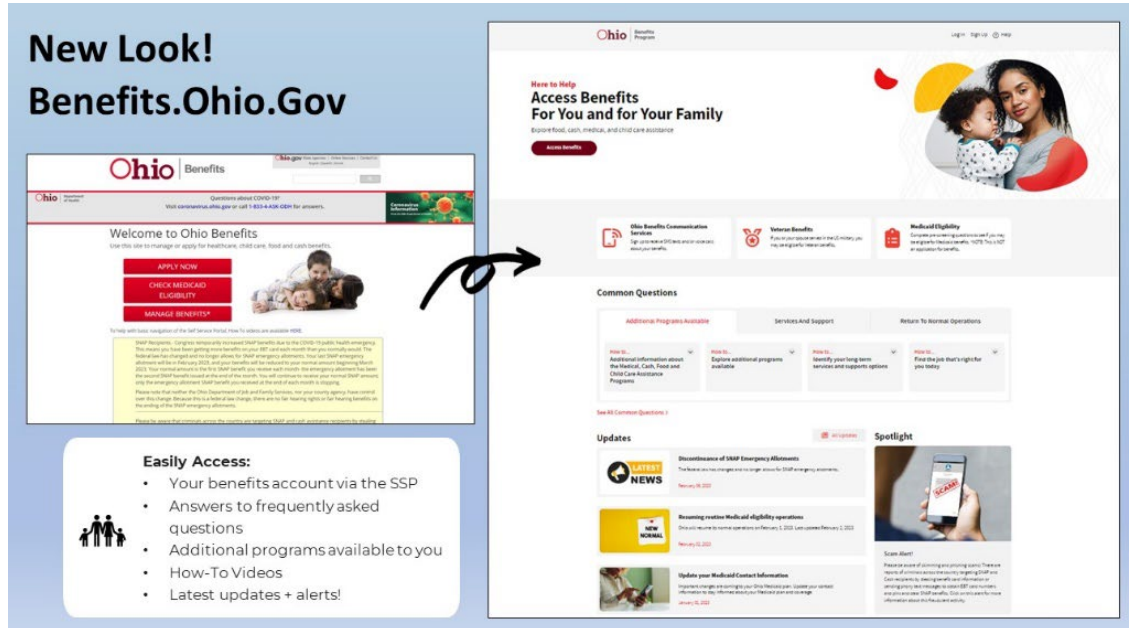
## THE IMPACT – WHAT WE MADE BETTER

Applying for benefits online is challenging, and often takes place at a vulnerable time. Improving the user journey is an important undertaking because it directly affects the lives of many people who rely on government assistance to meet their basic needs. Improving the experience of workers that support these benefit programs enables them to direct their time and energy toward the people they are serving, instead of at the technology they are using.



Benefits.Ohio.Gov’s one-stop landing page (Figure 4) format minimizes distractions and navigational clicks by providing pertinent information front and center. Residents can easily find the information they are looking for and are directed to specific information for their county. When users encounter a well-designed, intuitive portal or application process, they are more likely to feel that their needs are being taken seriously and that the system is working for them. This, in turn, can help to reduce the anxiety that often accompanies the application process. When users trust the system, they are more likely to continue to use and adopt the system, alleviating worker burden as well.

Figure 4



The SSP design team identified **132 product enhancements** and **23 system improvements**, 50% of which have already been implemented with the others being slotted for upcoming releases. Research indicated that

the SSP was designed for one type of user – an English-speaking, technology-savvy individual applying for their own benefits. For all other users, the experience was confusing and difficult. Additionally, the language, user interface, accessibility barriers, and system issues broke trust with users and prevented them from using the SSP. These insights helped the Ohio Benefits Program build a more seamless and supportive experience. By adopting this approach, the aim was to motivate and support users to complete the application process, rather than overwhelming them with bureaucratic hurdles.

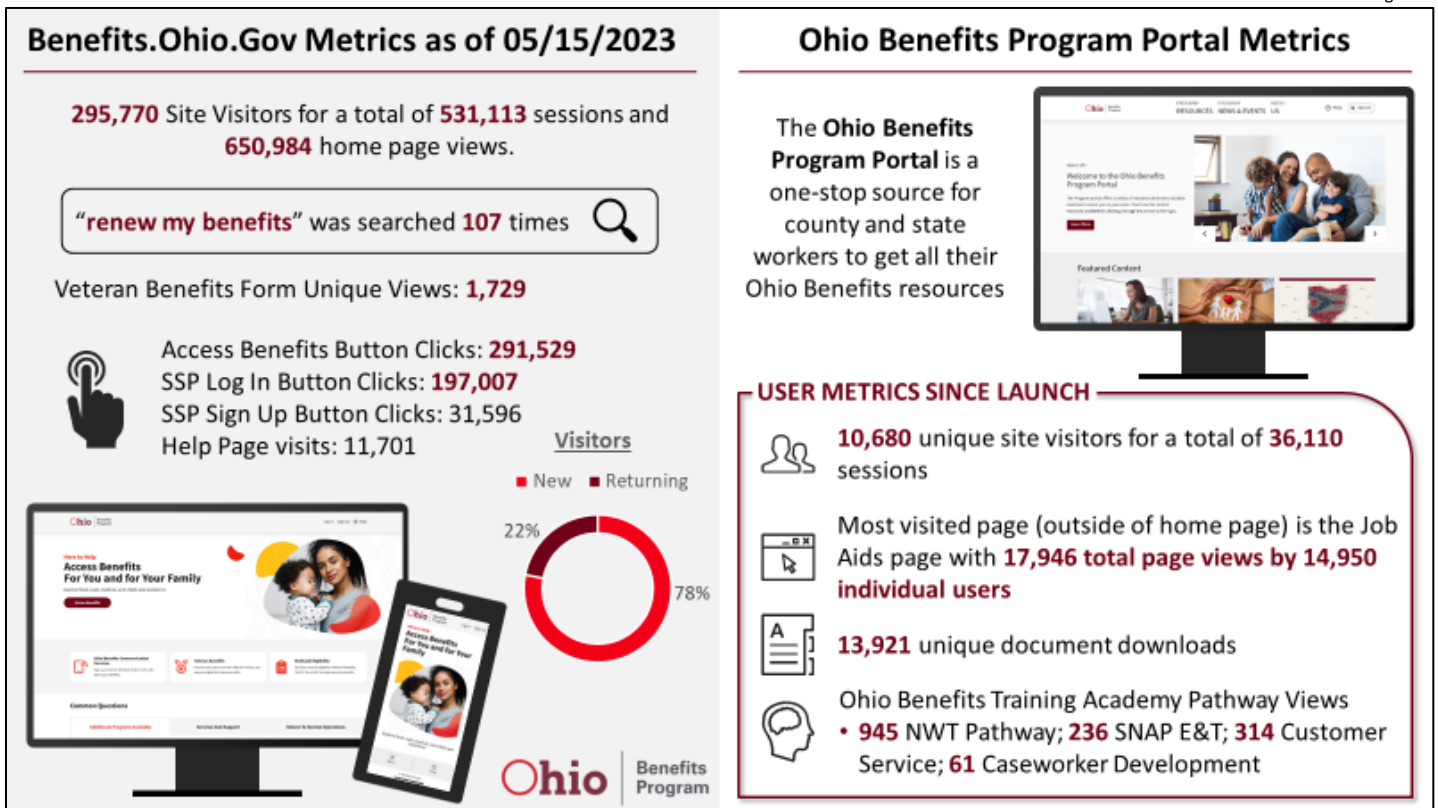
Finally, the optimization of the Ohio Benefits Program Portal allows workers to find the information and resources they are looking for efficiently and effectively, enabling them to direct their valuable time and attention to the Ohioans that need them. This one-stop format provides everything they need in one place.

### HOW WE KNOW

The Ohio Benefits Program ran two WEVO studies to measure Self-Service Portal experience prior to the user-experience updates to compare how the experience scored across five diagnostic categories and validate whether the changes made improved the experience for end users. The scores increased **by at least 50% across all five** of WEVO’s diagnostic categories, which include users’ **first impressions** and how **engaging, intuitive, trusted,** and **valuable** the experience is.

Internal workers using the Ohio Benefits Program Portal continue to provide positive feedback on the centralization of training and resources and the optimized experience it provides workers in their daily duties.

The Ohio Benefits Program is now able to monitor traffic to the site, anticipate what information needs shared or expanded upon and see exactly how many users are choosing to seek additional information and resources. In the first month that the Benefits.Ohio.Gov site was live, the landing page had over 400,000 views, with nearly half of those visitors choosing to also access their benefit information in the SSP [Figure 5].



## WHAT'S NEXT

The Benefits.Ohio.Gov landing page will continue to develop and will incorporate other ongoing initiatives related to the redesign of benefit notices and the accessibility of additional benefit information. Underutilized resources and opportunities for additional crucial services will be incorporated in a user-friendly way, while managing to consolidate and optimize the inundation of information residents receive after applying for benefits. Users will be provided with not only the necessary information to help them complete an application, but helpful directions on what to do once they receive their benefits, and how to make use of all the programs available to them.

By actively seeking input from users, the agencies are sending a powerful message that they are invested in listening to their concerns and working to improve their experience. Future roadmaps will build on the human-centered focus of Benefits.Ohio.Gov and the SSP. To further enhance the way Ohioans are engaging with these online services, two added support functions will be designed: a Benefits.Ohio.Gov Landing page chatbot and an SSP virtual assistant.

Opportunities for enhancement to the portal are regularly evaluated as new IOP innovations become available. The Ohio Benefits Program is dedicated to equipping workers with the resources they need to support Ohioans looking for assistance.

## A SUCCESSFUL CROSS-BOUNDARY COLLABORATION FOCUSING ON THE PEOPLE AT THE HEART OF IT ALL

Overall, this project has sparked a culture of innovation and continuous improvement. By prioritizing user needs and feedback, and employing a human-centered approach, the Ohio Benefits Program has been able to identify areas for improvement and implement innovative solutions that make the application process more efficient and effective for all involved. The success of this work is a testament to the transformative power of human-centered design, which has the potential to revolutionize the way government approaches complex challenges and creates more meaningful, user-centered solutions. The Ohio Benefits Program's shift in focus to human-centered design keeps Ohioans (to borrow another state slogan) at **The Heart of it All**.