VIRGINIA'S WEBSITE MODERNIZATION PROGRAM

Project initiation: 2022
Project completion: November 2023

Cross-Boundary Collaboration & Partnerships

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Executive Summary and Project Description

The Virginia Information Technologies Agency (VITA) manages the Commonwealth of Virginia's information technology (IT) enterprise, overseeing governance, infrastructure, procurement and security services for Virginia's almost 70 executive branch agencies and nearly 60,000 state employees.

When Gov. Youngkin took office in 2022, he challenged Virginia executive branch employees to make government work better. He and Secretary of Administration Lyn McDermid had a vision to ensure Virginia government websites were accessible, secure and consistently branded to ensure trustworthiness and ease of use for Virginians. Each agency has specific needs for customers and maintains its own separate websites, with its own functionalities, layouts, branding and ways of doing business with constituents. There was no easy or consistent way to tell whether a website was a part of Virginia government or some other entity.

With over 1,500 websites in the executive branch portfolio and no central control, the Virginia government web world was sprawling and in need of a unified review. To address this issue, VITA's enterprise solutions team launched the Website Modernization Project, which aimed to improve on each of these needs for better security, accessibility and consistency in look and feel.

This challenging work would require partnerships with every single agency to make much-needed changes – ones that took socialization, education and trust-building – to be successful.

Project Narrative

Idea:

VITA leadership took a strong, collaborative approach that brought cross-disciplinary teams together from the entire enterprise, including security experts, IT liaisons, web teams and communications partners. Through focus groups, workshops, town halls, newsletters and weekly office hours sessions, VITA created first a project, and then (based on customer demand and need), a full program, to address the most critical requirements and provide important updates. This community has grown to nearly

1,000 executive branch employees, all who have a vested stake in Virginia websites being the very best they can be to serve their customers.

Implementation:

The project included multiple workstreams developed by expert teams of web, security staff, enterprise architects, project managers, IT colleagues and communications professionals to make the effort successful. Together with customer agencies, the team:

- developed new web standards,
- created a full portfolio of shared tools, services and solutions that everyone could use,
- deployed a unified branding bar, domain naming convention, new Commonwealth design system and full downloadable templates for a cohesive digital experience for constituents,
- established tested workflows for remediation with production-ready government vendors,
- provided training so that everyone had the same level of knowledge and experience to achieve the program goals, and
- communicated regularly through virtual meetings and newsletters

The project team determined that programmatic and full-scale success could be realized if they focused on leadership engagement, appropriate levels of communication, ample end-user training, and the customers' collective and individual experiences.

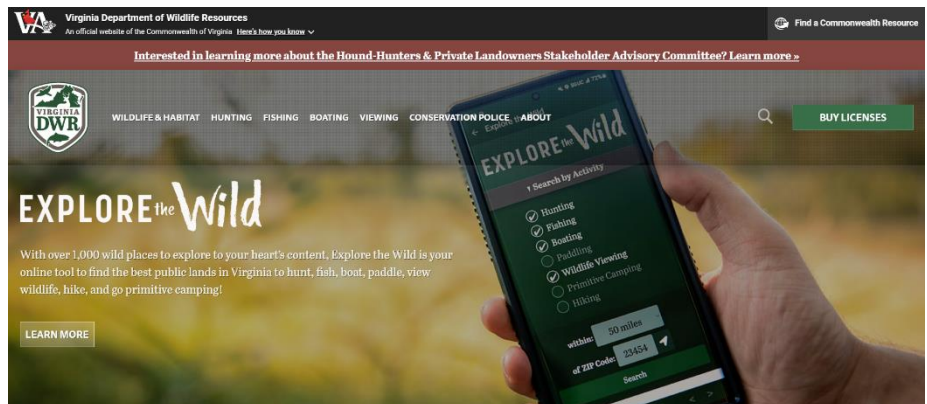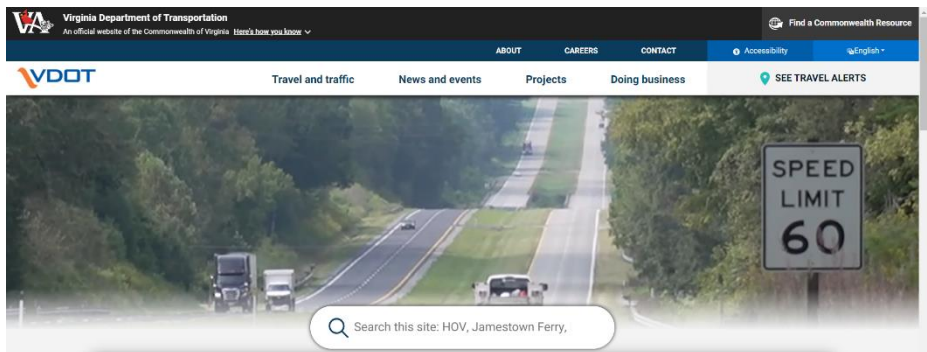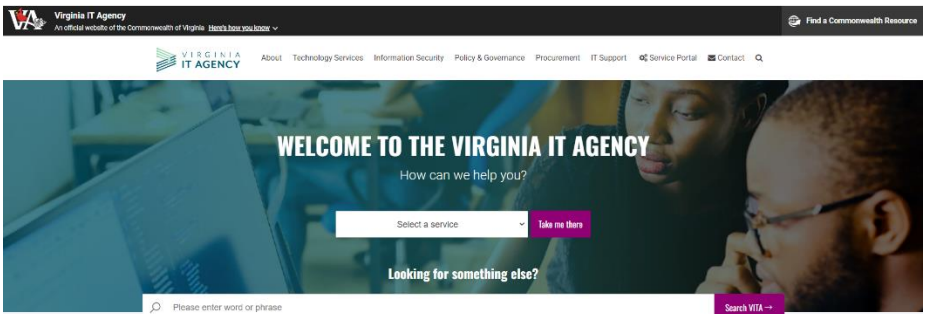*Leadership engagement: making changes without mandates*
Unfunded mandates are not unusual in state government. The challenge then becomes adoption and implementation, often with limited funds and people resources. Support, leadership and involvement by Secretary McDermid helped fuel the success of this program. She was regularly briefed on progress, socialized the issue and the goals with her fellow cabinet members and provided review and approvals every step of the way. In fact, the secretary encouraged the team to develop a friendly competition that could help move the needle.

New web standards
The new web standards were created to help support and provide appropriate guidance for the program. The standards covered nearly all facets, from as simple as conforming to appropriate domain naming standards to covering full site architecture and functionality. These new standards provide a more cohesive user experience for site visitors while also providing critical guidance to web teams about conformance to other critical needs in accessibility and security. (some main agency sites previously used a .org convention. The new top-tier standard requires which can be confusing when assessing an official government site

The branding bar and new cross-agency functionalities

One of the first ideas of the project was to request that agencies fully redesign and rebrand their sites to conform to one look and feel. While sound in theory, the practicable application would be challenging across so many disparate agency business needs and requirements. Agencies quickly pushed back on this and the team adjusted to find a solution that would fulfill the cohesive branding need without completely rebranding and redesigning every site. The team instead developed a branding bar, complete with one Virginia-centric identity (a design using a cardinal and dogwood, Virginia's state bird and flower, respectively). This branding bar would provide site users ample and prominent notification at the top of every page that the included material was both trusted and official. Further building on the branding bar's capabilities, the team was able to infuse a search capability that would span across all government sites, allowing the user to navigate easily to sought information without needing to have background knowledge about exactly what each agency's responsibilities and scopes are.

The Website Modernization Program Hub online

The project team developed a specific hub on the VITA external website to ensure that all folks who may use VITA services had access to the needed resources in one place. The hub provides fast access to the web standards, all previous newsletters as well as quick links to templates, coding for the branding bar and a growing knowledge base of frequently asked questions.

Training and tools

In order to achieve goals of cohesion across the enterprise, the team ensured that agency customers had a one-stop shop of tools ready-made for the Commonwealth environment. The VITA team took the new tools through needed procurement processes, security checks and needed customization to make the program work at an enterprise level. Among these new portfolio tools, Acunetix 360 and Siteimprove helped agencies drive progress across several different metrics in accessibility and security. With shared toolsets, the teams scattered across the state and the enterprise could share experiences and lessons learned, build a community of resources and leverage the strength in diversity of skillsets among the program membership.

Friendly competition to build partnered momentum and celebrate success

The VITA team helped champion built-in, incentivized opportunities to share progress and updates. One recent opportunity was a friendly competition among all agencies to share jumps in scores across several factors, which resulted in impressive movements and updates from dozens of agencies. This supportive, partnership-based approach helped create a positive environment of progress instead of a mandated, negative focus. The team also created certifications for staff who went the extra mile to learn new technologies or succeeded using the new standards or frameworks.

Impact:

The project has achieved remarkable progress and success. In just a year, agency customers across the enterprise doubled their websites' accessibility compliance from 44% to over 88%. The cohesively-designed branding bar was deployed to 100% of public-facing sites to ensure consistency. Using similar tools and programs provided shared knowledge and collective problem solving, which saved money, time and resources across the enterprise. This programmatic partnership sets the Commonwealth up for compounding success in future opportunities together.

What started as a project has now blossomed into a full-fledged program. With changing standards, a need for continuous refreshes, creativity and building of a community, VITA has seen both the demand and the strong outcomes of what happens when you:
- collaborate closely with your customers and adjust to their feedback
- create a fun, incentivized way to make progress together

- build shared toolsets for enterprise use, and then train everyone on how to use them
- develop ongoing check-in opportunities through open-door sessions and weekly calls

The program provided the right tools, a collaborative environment to solution across agency lines as partners, and continuously celebrated good work to support overall progress and success.