CPSU

Permissions Capability Platform

DEPARTMENT OF HOME AFFAIRS

CPSU Proposal for in-house bid

Community and Public Sector Union (PSU Group)

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Inquiry into the failed visa processing capability and the broader issue of Australian Public Service (APS) sector IT procurements and
Submission 24
Submission 4 - Attachment 2

CPSU PROPOSAL FOR IN-HOUSE BID – PERMISSIONS CAPABILITY PLATFORM

Introduction

Secretary Pezullo told the Digital Transformation Agency's (DTA) Summit that Australian Public Service (APS) leaders needed to "get our act together" to achieve "a rapid paradigm shift" that will enable technology for the public service of the future. He also said it was not the fault of "the great staff" who work in technical areas. "It's a strategy question. It's a leadership question. It's a management question."

In October 2020 the Department of Home Affairs and DTA partnered to release a new Request for Tender for the "Delivery of a Permissions Capability for government services". This permissions capability requires the capacity to be scaled up to be used by the entire department and the rest of the APS. This RFT calls for a provider to work with the Commonwealth government under a Deed of Standing Offer to design, deliver and provide ongoing support for a new Permissions Capability architecture.

We take this opportunity to present this case for an "in-house bid". It will demonstrate the APS is better placed than any private company to build the Permissions Capability. Our skills, and expertise rival any external company. Given the opportunity, Australian public servants will build a world class system that exceeds the quality, reliability and suitability of what a private tenderer would propose, and cost a fraction of the price. Further, building the capability in-house would mean valuing the staff already employed and providing opportunities to better the department and the wider public service.

Accepting an in-house bid would lead the re-imagining of the public service proposed by the Thodey Review – a technology-enabled public service. Recommendation 15 specifically calls for action to ensure the APS is able to develop and build user friendly system solutions.

Background: Previous successes & failures

The success of the online account platform

Right now, the vast majority of applications for visas and citizenship, are lodged via a platform built by public servants in-house. Since 2011, various sections have expertly upscaled and enhanced these client-facing systems to meet the needs of our clients and our internal decision makers quickly and adeptly. This platform is a cohesive online platform that utilised a reuse model from inception before it was commonplace. The online forms in ePlus use a model where form questions and functionality are easily reused across visa, citizenship and other products like APEC Business Travel Card (ABTC) card applications. This type of platform is scalable and could be reused for other services offered by the Department or APS.

Departmental officers also built a form component library to support consistency, facilitate streamlined prototyping and provide a source of truth for business rules. This library was rebuilt using modern technologies and methodologies. It was built without disruption to delivery.

The online account platform allows clients and their agents to lodge applications, monitor their progress, access their correspondence, provide documents for their applications and advise the Department of any changes. We now have over 10 years of corporate knowledge and experience of the pros and cons of reuse models and in the successful implementation of large scale systems to the global public.

Brave and innovative managers decided to invest in their people and we have been moving the ICT capabilities of the Department in the context of visas and citizenship forward, under extremely difficult circumstances, for 20 years using legacy and new systems. These managers saw potential in building ICT capability, including in the regions. They saw the potential in employing those who had come from visa processing in ICT delivery roles. The Australian Computer Society submission to the Thodey Review into the APS recognised the benefit of utilising the unique expertise of APS employees when developing user interfaces.

If we continue to grow this capacity our options for a stronger, better more capable public service are endless.

The failure of GVP

The Department attempted to outsource the development of a new visa processing platform from 2006. When it was ready, almost five years later, it was in operation for less than 12 months before the decision was taken to decommission it. This platform was called the Generic Visa Platform (GVP). It was built by IBM as part of the Systems for People program. After sinking more than $450 million it was determined that GVP was not fit for purpose and was subsequently decommissioned.

The stakes were high then and now they are even higher. Immigration delivers economic growth in the tourism and education industry. Immigration delivers secure, and cohesive communities. We continue to battle with existing outsourcing arrangements that stifle our ability to make changes to temporary visas that have been in place since the beginning of online visa lodgement, including delaying government initiatives to wait for vendors to catch up.

We fear that allowing this work to be created outside of the department is only opening us up for further issues. There is a risk that once again the successful tender will not address the key components, will provide a platform that does not support the delivery of our basic services and will again need to be decommissioned with great risk to program delivery and to the Department.

Capability and Capacity

We have built, rebuilt and maintained the current systems used by the department to process visa and citizenship applications (and other similar boutique products).

We are experienced in delivering the listed requirements including but not limited to:

- virtual assistants
- correspondence systems
- dynamic online forms and mobile applications
- secure user accounts
- identity resolution/biometrics capture
- payments and refund systems

- appointment systems
- reporting and analysis capabilities
- case management systems
- record management
- business rule orchestration
- risk systems

We are experienced in developing systems and tools that align with legislation and government directives including safeguarding the border.

Our current service provision in Home Affairs requires a significant security infrastructure to assure against cyber attacks, ensures personal privacy and protects sensitive government information.

We have excellent relationships with a range of APS agencies including memorandums of understanding for shared ICT services and infrastructure with Services Australia, DFAT and several more.

Our architects have been heavily involved already in the capture, analysis and documentation of technical design for this product.

We also have experience using modern frameworks and methodologies such as:

- Cloud technologies including Azure and Amazon
- ReactJS and AngularJS
- DevOps
- Utilisation of technologies like API Gateway to enable scalability and inter-operability
- Digital user experience methods
- Frameworks
- Containerisation
- Enterprise-scale data handling (DB2/Oracle)
- Infrastructure as code

- Automated testing
- Behaviour Driven Development
- Agile, Scrum, SAFe and Waterfall methods, including leading cross government agency learning and development
- Experience in a wide range of delivery platforms, for example, the Atlassian suite, HP suite, Agile Manager.

We doubt any other tenderer would be able to match our claims that:

- We already understand the exact business context in which these requirements exist.
- We have responded to these issues in the past including: standing up new online lodgement systems for simple and complex visa and citizenship products, creating new visa processing products including work allocation, enforcement and processing systems
- We created and continue to maintain a permissions platform designed for citizenship initially and then scaled up for visa products, enforcement actions and border processing under the Migration and Citizenship Acts, and now the Border Force Act.
- We have the knowledge to dismantle and decommission systems and provide transition of caseloads and processes in alignment with Commonwealth record keeping and privacy requirements.
- We understand how our systems currently integrate with each other and how best to integrate them with a new platform.

This strong organisation resumé is transferable to other agency jurisdictions, legislative frameworks and service environments.

We agree that our systems are aging and need to be modernised and we know we are the only people with the background and expertise to do it. We know this because we have been keeping the Visa and Citizenship programs operating in spite of this lack of investment.

There would be a number of requirements for this tender that would be met without any cost or effort including, compliance with Commonwealth policies and retention of agency control over decisions and information.

Earlier this year, the Government directed that the borders would be closed for certain countries due to COVID-19. This was an ever-changing list as the situation progressed. The public servants who currently manage the visa systems were able to immediately react to these changes within hours. When we retain control over our systems all it takes is an email.

Proposed Solution

Regarding the use cases in the tender, we have already digitised the vast majority of visas and the citizenship caseload. We already offer integrated application experiences for clients including adaptable question sets and risk settings. We have done this for simpler products like Maritime Crew and Transit visas and very complicated products like citizenship; and we can do it again, this time with a focus on enabling whole-of-government functions.

High Level Delivery Plan:

1. Digitisation of passenger cards

There is a strong and urgent need here to enable a public health response. This data is needed by Border Force for immigration and customs compliance, it is used by quarantine and law enforcement and various health authorities. We would prioritise this delivery by expanding our existing capabilities.

The digital passenger declarations would be built using our existing mobile apps delivery and mobile responsive web applications. The ABTC app was built in-house for Android/iOS using modern technologies, holographic security features and cloud tenancies. This app already allows for seamless travel through borders for ABTC holders.

Building this quickly using existing technology, is a prudent and efficient way to resolve this important need. It would build public confidence in the Permissions Capability program and would also allow time for the whole of government approach to the permission platform to be progressed.

2. The Permissions Platform

We would approach this by first conducting a thorough current state analysis engaging the relevant government agencies. We would ensure that the full gamut of existing capabilities in the APS were known and rated according to leveragability to a whole of government product. Without this there is a clear risk that we would again, build systems in a fragmented manner.

The progress and outcomes of this analysis would be reported to the Permissions Capability Expert Panel (the panel), representative of key government agencies. They would develop the unified, integrated strategy to drive this work and determine the delivery hubs (responsible agency) for the key deliverables. The barriers to creating a common platform are not technical, they lie with the various segmented legal and policy frameworks. These siloed legal frameworks have historically meant agencies have developed their ICT shops separately. A private tenderer is unable to resolve this barrier, only the public service can.

An audit of the current functions across agencies would identify any in-use technologies that are scalable including data lake, ServiceNow and blockchain to name a few.

The issue is not the scalability of technologies but rather a plan to implement a broader solution.

3. A simple visa product

Utilising the initial analysis and discovery findings of the current state analysis, key opportunities would be identified for the most suitable platforms to enable later integration. Based on current strengths we would consider the panel would iteratively provide recommendations such as:

Develop front end online services based on Home Affairs experience i.e. using development of the New eLibrary as a basis for methodology and technology.

Model client data security and storage through technologies available with Services Australia and Home Affairs, i.e., use of data lake tenancies.

Form a Working Group to identify key issues where modernisation is stymied by legislative frameworks. The working group will deliver a plan for enabling legal and regulatory milestones and communicate these across the APS.

Economic Benefit to Australia

The investment in permanent staff who have the training, experience and accountability to do this work is to the long-term benefit of the APS and the community. The cost would also be a lot less than a mass engagement of contractors and consultants from a private company all of whom would require a range of administration (including Employee Suitability Clearances) to enable their access to our staff and resources.

Public servants must consider which platforms and tools are the most cost effective. Private companies look at immediate profit and aim to ensure the maximum cost is incurred to make the contract worth their while. Further, private companies will push platforms that are likely to benefit them – due to their business partnerships or investments.

Ending the constant outsourcing of ICT to private companies and instead rebuilding in-house ICT capacity is a critical infrastructure project that will deliver community benefits, help the nation recover from the recession and build our nation's digital skill base.

Indigenous Participation

The public service could utilise the existing Indigenous Australian Government Development Program to drive the introduction of a specialised ICT stream.

Conclusion

Public servants see delivery differently to private sector workers.

We deliver for Government and the community. Our bottom line is about value not profit. When we are asked to build something, we want to know about the Government's intention. We want to understand the interaction with the existing regulatory framework. We want to know about the clients using the visa product.

In the digital space, we think about the balance between making the online form user friendly and collecting information in a way to assist decision makers to determine risks to the integrity of visa programs.

What we don't think about is profits, shareholders, contractual clauses, the easiest way to get paid, and how to sell add-on products to a client.

Our CIO has stated that the Home Affairs department has the strongest ICT capability in the APS. This is an important decision and an opportunity for the APS to lead in the burgeoning field of techno-ethics. We cannot rely on the private sector to apply ethical decision making when their focus in on profits. All we need is the Government to believe in the value of the public service, to let us enable recruitment if required, and use the foundations we have built these past two decades to deliver the future. Investment in the public service of the future, committing resources to a new way of delivering... now *that's* disruption.

Secretary Pezzullo stated at the DTA's Digital Summit, "Unless the strategy is laid down to move forward in a unified fashion, in an integrated fashion, all of that good work will come to naught. We have to bring this together."

A private company is not well placed to achieve this, we need public servants with the right expertise and knowledge to be given the freedom to use the public service craft to shape this platform.