

## Next Step online community

**Published On:** 17 June 2014

**Organisation:** Australian Government Department of Human Services

**Country:** Australia

**Level of government:** Central government

**Sector:** General public services, Social protection

**Type:** Communication, Digital, Public Service

**Launched in:**

**Overall development time:**

12 months

**Like this innovation**

0 persons like this innovation

# Description

---

The Next Step online community was an invitation only closed community for customers who were transitioning from Parenting Payment to Newstart Allowance. Next Step was designed to help this niche group with the transition from welfare payments into work by providing them with activities to build their skills and confidence, resources to understand the process, and forums to build relationships with other parents to receive emotional support during the change.

The Department of Human Services partnered with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) to explore the use of social media technologies to facilitate better communication between the department and its customers.

Next Step was also seeking to measure social trust in the community to see whether citizens' views and behaviours towards government can be influenced – a first for the Australian Government.

---

## Why the innovation was developed

At a general level, the Department of Human Services and CSIRO are exploring the use of social media technologies to facilitate better communication with its customers. Regarding Next Step, during research with the target audience, parents described feeling lost during the transition between Parenting Payment and Newstart Allowance saying government did not provide sufficient information to make informed choices. Many parents in the focus group said they did not have any emotional support or networks to assist them. The majority of participants in the research group said they would be open to trying an online community to facilitate this transition.

---

## Objectives

Improve access, Improve effectiveness, Improve service quality, Improve social equity, Improve user satisfaction

In general:

- Investigate whether online communities are an effective way for the government to deliver services and support to citizens
- Evaluate effectiveness of social networking platform in providing customers with the opportunity to influence how the department communicates

In the specific case:

- Evaluate the usefulness of an online community for Parenting Payment customers in making the transition from welfare to work smoother
  - Provide customers with the means to discuss issues and share experiences with other parents, offering them a way to get social and emotional peer-support
- 

## Main beneficiaries

General population, Government staff, High-risk populations, Low-income groups

- Parents (including single parent families) who receive Parenting Payment but will be changing payments to Newstart Allowance which requires them to actively seek for work.
- 10 000 customers will be invited to join the online community

# Results

---

## Efficiency

As all community members were in similar situations, they often had the same questions or concerns. Moderators answered questions individually but these were visible to the whole community. It was evident through thumbs up ratings and multiple members thanking moderators for answers that these were not only seen by many members but they were also beneficial to many.

Even some passive members decided to comment to say that they had visited regularly to get up-to-date and reliable information.

This demonstrated that online communities can be a valuable service delivery channel, providing tailored information to a broad audience.

---

## Effectiveness

Accessing accurate and timely information contributed to building relationships between members and moderators. As a result, members turned to the community, in particular to the moderators, for specific information and the moderators would then investigate specific issues and provided regular updates to the community.

---

## Service quality

### Accessibility:

Members often posted their questions in Next Step before calling Centrelink in the hope they could avoid the need to call. Members indicated this was also because they worked during the opening hours of the call centre or to avoid telephone costs.

### Responsiveness:

Throughout the duration of Next Step, the moderators provided relevant and up-to-date information to members in the forum (and in the resources). Most of the time moderators provided information in response to specific requests or to demands for clarifications. In other cases, moderators spontaneously offered information on a topic, when that topic was raised by members.

When responding to members, the moderators were also careful to include in their answers information that could be relevant to others.

### Reliability:

Members used the forum as their preferred channel for accurate and timely information; moderators became an interface to Human Services and a way to get information that was reliable and would have been otherwise difficult to obtain.

### Other:

Many members used the forum to share how they felt about the transition and their experiences dealing with Centrelink. The moderators became "the face of Human Services", which provided a welcome human touch to the whole transition and system.

---

## User satisfaction

Anecdotal feedback from users was that the platform was very useful and that they benefited from being involved in the community.

---

## Other improvements

- Live chats allowed users to directly get an answer to their question from an expert and shape content of discussion.
  - Peer group feeling and trust in the community can be enhanced.
  - Useful information through live chats, videos, podcasts etc. was brought directly to users via the platform instead of having to go to an office or call centre.
- 

## Evaluation

Research was undertaken and evaluated before the project was implemented. This included two face-to-face workshops and an online survey. Experts at CSIRO formally evaluated the findings and this was used to shape the design of the community and develop activities that would address the barriers and challenges they expressed.

All information provided on the Community Portal will be recorded and analysed to measure the success of this programme. Three months of formal evaluation and analysis was carried out at the close of the community in March. CSIRO provided the Department of Human Services with their evaluation findings through evaluation reports and presentations which contained detailed analysis.

# Development

---

## Design

In 2010 we conducted several face-to-face group interviews and developed an online survey to gather requirements from our customers (e.g. understand the type of support, whether emotional, financial and /or informational, that would be useful for them, and understand the difficulties/obstacles they face). These requirements informed the design and the implementation of an online community platform that we would like to evaluate in a trial with parents.

---

## Testing

The Next Step platform, launched in March 2012, is running for 12 months and serves as a trial for further projects in this realm. Platform was co-funded platform by CSIRO (40%) and Department of Human Services (60%).

---

## Partnerships

### The Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO)

Other Public Sector

The community is a research activity under an alliance between our department and CSIRO and the investment is cofounded by both organisations. To conduct this study, CSIRO developed a social networking platform which it is hosting. Activities for the users of the platform have been jointly developed by the department and CSIRO.

---

# Lessons Learned

---

## Lessons Learned

- Building a useful and solid online community requires significant staff time and investment (12 months planning). The community needs to be continually fed with new and engaging content – information, videos, podcasts, and discussion topics – to keep members coming back and participating.
  - Significant planning also needs to be done to ensure all necessary processes are in place. For example, weekend on call arrangements for staff to monitor the community and what to do in a crisis situation such as some threatening self harm.
- 

## Conditions for success

- Trust of users towards department of Human Services.
  - Trust of users among each other.
- 

## Other information

Besides measuring the engagement with the online community, we are particularly interested in helping participants build a social network and get peer-support. To do this, we are evaluating a buddy programme that aims to help people socialise within the online community, ensure they can find one or several partners (called buddies), and, over time, collaborate together and form strong ties.

To assess the efficacy of this programme and measure how participants relate to the community as a whole or to individual members, we are using a variety of scales adapted from scales developed and tested by Prentice and colleagues (Prentice et al., 1994) and Potsmes (Postmes et al., 2005).

In addition to the indicators mentioned above, we have the following research question with respect to how to measure social trust and its role in building social capital in an online community.

It is assumed that trust becomes an essential element of a successful online community and plays an important role to develop social capital. We plan to test this hypothesis in the proposed online community with an aim of increasing social capital.