

## Challenge.gov



**Published On:** 17 June 2014

**Organisation:** U.S. General Services Administration, GSA: Challenge.gov

**Country:** United States

**Level of government:** Central government

**Sector:** General public services

**Type:** Digital, Financial Resources, Methods

**Launched in:** 2010

**Link to the innovation's website**

**Like this innovation**

0 persons like this innovation

# Description

---

The challenge and prize programme at GSA provides an online platform, strategic consulting, training and best practices that enable federal agencies to manage and run public prize and crowdsourcing contests. Citizen solvers, individuals and companies, from around the world can contribute expertise and drive innovation by entering and providing solutions to the federal government's mission-centric problems, whether technical, scientific, or creative.

Using a challenge competition means agencies pay only for performance; whereas in other types of procurement, payment is guaranteed regardless of results and what is delivered. The key is that challenges are for specific types of procurements, where solvers are doing something new and/or differently than what could be done by buying a direct product or service, and therefore driving innovation.

---

## Why the innovation was developed

In September 2009, the President released his Strategy for American Innovation, calling for agencies to increase their ability to promote and harness innovation by using policy tools such as prizes and challenges. In March 2010, the United States Office of Management & Budget (OMB) issued a memo outlining the use of challenge and prize competitions in federal government. Among the reasons: Challenges allow the public and the government to co-create. They allow government to tap into the collective knowledge and resources of the public, and help the public more easily contribute their expertise to find better solutions. There is also legislature, the 2010 America COMPETES Act, which specifically gives agencies legal authority to run competitions. Other legal authorities are available, too, depending on how the agency and funding are structured.

---

## Objectives

Develop staff capacity, Enhance public trust, Enhance transparency, Improve effectiveness, Improve efficiency, Increase citizen engagement, Support economic growth

- Establish an important goal without having to choose the approach or the team that is most likely to succeed.
  - Pay only for results.
  - Highlight excellence in a particular domain of human endeavor to motivate, inspire, and guide others.
  - Increase the number and diversity of the individuals, organisations, and teams addressing a particular problem; or promote the challenge to national or international significance.
  - Improve the skills of the participants in the competition.
  - Stimulate private sector investment that is many times greater than the cash value of the prize.
  - Further a federal agency's mission by attracting more interest and attention to a defined programme, activity, or issue of concern.
  - Capture the public's imagination and change the public perception of what is possible.
- 

## Main beneficiaries

Businesses, Civil Society, General population, Government bodies, Government staff

- Federal agencies, 58 have run challenge competitions. The value of the challenge.gov platform through FY13 saved agencies from USD 50 000 - 100 000 since they did not need to build their own government-compliant technology to host the contests.
  - Competition winners, upwards of 500 individuals and companies who have been awarded prizes.
  - Citizens, who benefit from the technology and scientific advancements.
  - Consider also the cost savings offset by some competitions in which solutions are provided at a fraction of the cost of a traditional procurement – a benefit to the government and the citizens.
- 

## Existing similar practices

### Professional competition companies

In the private sector, civil society or elsewhere

Innocentive, ChallengePost, TopCoder, Kaggle, Tongal

There are a number of professional competition companies that specialise in science, technology and creative challenges: Innocentive, ChallengePost, TopCoder, Kaggle, Tongal. These organisations have millions of “solvers” around the world who participate. Private companies like this are often the key to success for federal challenges.

---

### X Prize, civic hack-a-thons and code-a-thons, innovations in media technology, New York City challenges

In public administration of my country

Xprize.org, Code for America, Knight News Challenge, Hack for Change

X-Prize is a grand challenge to stimulate innovation in space travel, Knight News Challenge looks for advancement in technology for news media and citizen engagement, the coding and hacking organisations bring diverse talent together to solve problems and build things, often using open data sets and building upon collaborative ideas and technology.

<http://www.Xprize.org>

---

## Results

---

### Efficiency

Challenge.gov gives agencies and citizens alike one place to go to explore and engage with all federal challenge and prize competitions. Agencies do not need to build their own web platforms to manage the initiatives.

Procuring challenge services can cost between USD 25 000 and USD 300 000, depending on the platform and services needed. The community of solvers each platform provides is valuable. The cost offsets are estimated to be upwards of USD 2.5 million.

---

### Effectiveness

When solvers provide viable solutions to a challenge competition, the technology or advancement drives change within the agency – both in having the solution and effectively encouraging the agency to use challenges as a tool again, when appropriate.

---

### Service quality

#### Accessibility:

Challenge competitions provide for more engagement and interaction opportunities among government, private industry, non-profits, and individual citizens. Citizens who have an interest can do more than comment on policy, they can have direct impact by bringing expertise to the table.

#### Responsiveness:

The challenge programme and platform accommodate all levels of interaction – from those agencies just beginning, to those with a wide breadth of experience. Agencies and individuals can interact and take from the programme what they need at the time. It is not a “one size fits all” scenario and the team is dynamically situation to provide services at various levels.

#### Reliability:

The challenge.gov platform is an authorised source of showcasing government challenge contests so that all citizens who visit know that they are legitimate contests run by federal agencies and their partners.

#### Other:

The challenge and prize programme is designed to share best practices and information accurately, quickly and widely across federal agencies. Along with staff consultations, the content on HowTo.gov has been vetted by experts and is a guide and resource for managing competitions.

---

### User satisfaction

Customer surveys and listening sessions show a high level of satisfaction from agencies that use the platform and attend training (consistently scoring ratings of 4 and higher on a scale of 1-5). Nearly all of the agencies that use the platform come back to run subsequent challenges. Those that use other platforms do so for the unique and targeted solver communities available on those platforms.

---

### Evaluation

Academic analyses (Kevin Desouza paper) and evaluation by the 2012 Harvard Innovations in Government award process.

<http://kevindesouza.net/tag/challenge-gov/>

# Development

---

## Design

A presidential memo in 2009 to encourage federal agencies to use innovation tools, which led to an OMB memo in 2010. Challenge.gov was built as a result of these and launched in Sept. 2010.

The memo specifically called for a technical platform on which agencies could run challenge and prize competitions and charged GSA with that role. GSA manages the web presence along with federal-wide programme support, identifying resources and trends, and providing training. Challenge.gov is currently a central place for the public to access federal prize competitions.

At the agency level, it is often programme managers who have ideas for challenges and get support from leadership to run them. Some challenge contests are federally mandated.

As the programme has grown and agencies see results from their first forays into contests, agency leaders make it part of their strategic plans. There are a few agencies that have this type of innovation integrated into the culture.

Design time: 90 days

---

## Testing

The innovation is in a constant state of testing and analysis. The challenge and prize meme - [momentum?] is growing quickly and our programme is adapting with it in order to accommodate more new users and helping advanced users get more out of the programme.

Testing time: ongoing

---

## Implementation

### Tools used:

The key to implementation was having successes and experiences to share from agencies that used challenges before it became a federal-wide programme. The early innovators who piloted programmes at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) helped guide the framework. The technology is powered by a company that is active in the private sector challenge industry.

### Resources used:

- Contracting officer.
- Legal staff.
- Programme manager.
- Programme staff (2).
- Technology team (3-5 people in the build, 3 on customer support and maintenance/upgrades).
- Training staff – internal and external.
- Consulting team to work with agencies (also in programme staff).
- Writers and editors for website.

Implementation time: ongoing

---

## Diffusion

The challenge and prize team at GSA shares knowledge widely through training and speaking engagements. We have met with delegations from other countries, who are interested in the programme and provide resources and time to their staff. The programme itself is designed to be extended to all federal agencies in the U.S., and that includes formal training, meetings with our community of practice (comprised of more than 560 people), listserv messages, outreach on social media such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, and one-on-one strategic consultations.

Diffusion time: ongoing

---

## Challenges and solutions

The platform needed to be built in 90 days, so the GSA team responsible for creating the shared service of challenge.gov did a no-cost contract with a private challenge company to have them build and manage the technology. ChallengePost, an established competition and crowdsourcing platform, provided a section of their platform specifically for federal clients. At the time, this was agreed to be delivered and maintained with no financial obligation to GSA.

---

## Partnerships

### NASA and DARPA

#### Other Public Sector

Other public sector organisations were the basis for designing the programme, due to their success in piloting and launching challenge and prize initiatives in their agencies, including NASA and DARPA.

---

### ChallengePost

#### Private sector

The challenge.gov platform powered by and is based on a partnership with ChallengePost, a professional competition platform.

---

# Lessons Learned

---

## Lessons Learned

- Always have challenge competitions tied to a core agency mission.
  - A competition should not be treated as an inexpensive way to get something, though that may be the result in the end.
  - Recruit energetic, smart, creative thinkers to work on your programme. People who are OK with hearing “no” and still find a way to “yes” while building a community of key stakeholders.
  - Have legal guidelines for the challenge programme overall that allow for flexibility, while also protecting. Sometimes the rules are so narrow as to stop innovation or to not accommodate the ever changing landscape.
  - Know what you want to measure for your results before you start and be sure to track this data from the start.
  - It is OK if a competition fails. If an answer can’t be found among thousand of people in a crowdsourcing initiative, this could mean that the agency can stop doing that work and put money into other resources.
  - A challenge competition does not end when the winner is announced. Continue to engage your fans/supporters/contestants. Have a plan for implementation and follow-up with those who are interested and to the general public.
- 

## Conditions for success

- High-level administration support is critical to the success, along with legislation and structure that encourages and allows for government agencies to participate.
  - Legal, technical teams, contracting officers and programme managers must work together to create a viable and successful programme.
  - The programme must have marketing and communications, along with training, to bring key people, including citizen solvers and potential partners, into the fold.
  - There is a myriad network of people and skills within an ecosystem to make this work.
- 

## Other information

Even after three years, this programme is still in the infancy stages and growing quickly. Much has changed and more professional companies are getting into this space to offer services to governments and industry customers who want to run challenge programmes. This is an exciting time to be in the industry, but know that fine-tuning needs are being addressed and better practices are constantly evolving. Know what are myths and what is real. Challenge competitions are not a tool that can solve every problem, so one must have discretion and focused direction.

Please see the on-demand training we have to get an idea of what one would need to know to start and manage a challenge or prize competition.

<http://www.howto.gov/training/on-demand#challenges-and-prizes>

More online resources are available at [www.HowTo.gov/challenges](http://www.HowTo.gov/challenges)