Developing an improved myGov for all Australians.

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Introduction

The myGov platform is the front door to essential federal government services. It validates a user's identity and then provides access to several government departments and agencies, including Centrelink, Medicare and the Australian Taxation Office.

A government-appointed expert panel is currently conducting a user audit of myGov, led by David Thodey and with members including former Human Rights Commissioner Edward Santow, eSafety Commissioner Julie Inman Grant, social epidemiologist Professor Emily Banks and former head of global economic policy at Uber Amit Singh.

The audit is considering the user experience of myGov, its functions and performance, and its role and position within the wider government services ecosystem. The panel will deliver recommendations to government to inform the future design and direction of the myGov platform.

As part of this audit, InnovationAus.com held a roundtable discussion in collaboration with the panel in Canberra at QT Canberra on 8 November 2022. The discussion focused on potential improvements that could make myGov more efficient and transparent, and provide a better user experience to people with a disability and marginalised individuals. The roundtable attendees also discussed how to bring small businesses into the design process.

The audit marks an opportunity to address some of the issues that have previously been raised around myGov, and any negative perceptions that Australians might have about the platform.

A central theme of the roundtable discussion was the need to make sure myGov is accessible for the most marginalised members of the community - the ones who need it the most - and that any future improvements are designed with their needs at the forefront.

An increasing focus on cybersecurity and data breaches also means that data security must be foundational in a myGov redesign. Attendees said it's crucial that users can control what information they share with the government, including which specific agencies and departments hold which pieces of information.

The potential power of a myGov rebuild as a procurement instrument was also identified, and efforts to bring local, small and medium businesses into the process were discussed.

The discussion was recorded, refined and structured into this white paper.

Attendees

Glenn Archer, Visiting Fellow, the Australian National University

Louise Stone, Clinical Associate Professor, the Australian National University

Mel Hagedorn, Director of Client Services, Granicus

David Elliot, Executive Director, Agile Digital

Marie Johnson, CEO, Centre for Digital Business Pty Limited *(providing information in advance)*

Abu Odigie, CEO and Co-Founder, Tendertrace

Cathy Lill, Head of Product Engineering, Hireup

Jefferson Haw, Principal Solutions Architect, Okta

Cath Thompson, Co-founder, Hypereal

Zoe Rose, Lead, Great Question Training

David Hazlehurst, myGov User Audit

Monita Lal, myGov User Audit

Jordan Hatch, myGov User Audit

Olivia Hall, myGov User Audit

Lisa Jansen, myGov User Audit

Stephen Wilson, Managing Director, Lockstep Consulting

Corrie McLeod, Publisher, InnovationAus.com and Moderator

Key themes

Improving efficiency and transparency

A central theme throughout the roundtable discussion was how myGov can be a more efficient and transparent service, for the benefit of everyone. A common perception among attendees was that the current version of myGov is cumbersome and hard to use, which is deterring people from accessing some of the government services available through myGov.

The roundtable also discussed the misconception that myGov encompasses all the services and agencies that sit behind it, such as Centrelink or the Australian Taxation Office, rather than acting as the authentication service. The myGov User Audit panel emphasised that myGov is the front door for the government and does not control the actual services that people experience.

People regularly think that they're still on myGov when they're accessing services from the Australian Taxation Office, for example. This is problematic when issues accessing these services reflect poorly on the myGov platform.

A lack of cohesion between the services has also been troublesome for users.

A number of attendees said that differing user experience between myGov and government services is making the process of interacting with government overly complex and leading to dissatisfaction and distrust. The current audit was identified as an opportunity to address some of this confusion and make myGov a more simple and seamless experience for users.

"The government chooses to expose its own complexities, and that's unnecessary. It just complicates the lives of people who don't feel the need to understand that. It's just unnecessary," an attendee said.

"It's exposing the mechanisms of government to people who just want to get things done. How do we build an architecture for the future from which all this can hang?" added another participant.

"If the citizen has to understand the bureaucratic infrastructure to use the service, then the service has failed," one expert concluded.

Making myGov a more cohesive federal government interface, with less differentiation between services and agencies, was recommended to make it a less confusing experience for users.

Digital design with accessibility at the forefront

A number of roundtable attendees with lived experience of disability and who work with marginalised members of the community raised concern that myGov is too difficult to use for these members of society. They said that this excludes part of the population from crucial government services such as welfare.

Concerns were also raised about the growing digital divide in Australia, despite increasing efforts to digitise government services. It was suggested that continuing to advance myGov could exacerbate accessibility issues unless the voices of people with a disability and in marginalised communities are centred and amplified.

"Their experience is, over and over again, triage and exclusion, and because we know that the bottom quintel has five times as many mental health conditions but five times less services - they get excluded at a rate of knots," an attendee said.

There is also a perception among many marginalised people that they will be unable to use or understand myGov, which discourages them from using government services online. This was identified as a serious issue that must be addressed.

The discussion explored how simply digitising something doesn't inherently increase accessibility, and that sometimes it can actually do the opposite.

According to one expert, "it's a seductive narrative, that it increases access. But it's like a door without a key - it's there but you can't get into it."

To address these issues, it was recommended that a diverse range of voices must be included on the myGov panel and in the development and trialling of any new features or services. It was also said that it's important for the public service to be trained in designing services for people with a disability.

"If access is to become a priority for myGov, a commensurate body of work in upskilling public servants specifically in these topics will also be required, because the skillset is not currently available," said one of the participants.

Many attendees also made the point that placing the needs of those with a disability and other marginalised groups at the forefront will ensure that myGov is developed for the benefit of all users.

Currently, most government services are designed with the average Australian user in mind. However, the industry experts at the roundtable argued that if they are designed for the most in-need users, they will be more effective and easier to use for everyone.

"If you make something that works really well for disabled people, literally everyone prefers it. All high literacy people prefer texts that are written for low literacy people. When you solve for disadvantaged users, you solve for everyone else without putting much more money into it," asserted one attendee.

Improving procurement to include more local businesses

Roundtable participants agreed that the design of the "enhanced myGov" over the last two years has been largely dominated by global tech companies and consulting firms.

British consulting giant Deloitte has been involved in the redevelopment of myGov since early 2020, while a four-company panel was established later that year to work on the project. The panel features one local company in Arq Group and three multinational giants: Deloitte, IBM and Accenture.

Numerous attendees said that the design of myGov into the future offers an opportunity to bring local companies into the fold and encourage the contribution of Australian small and medium businesses (SMBs). This must come from an active effort to open up tenders and the procurement process to local companies, with attendees raising concerns that the process has so far been inaccessible for local SMBs.

"We can collaborate with government, we can build better products at a cheaper price for government, but we can't compete," one industry leader said.

Improvements could come from adopting an "outcomes-based" procurement process which looks at the benefit further work may have on the local Australian tech sector, for example, as opposed to giving work to an overseas firm.

One participant suggested that "outcome-based procurement is the holy grail," going on to say that, "In Canberra we have moved into a lemon marketplace where the government has been forced back to timesheets."

"It's incredibly difficult - we can't compete with these major companies that can fulfil 90 percent of the stuff," another attendee agreed.

Those representing small businesses called on the government to be more open to collaborating with local SMBs on projects such as myGov. This will see products being developed at a cheaper price, while building local skills and capability, they said.

Giving users control over their data

This year in Australia, a series of high profile data breaches brought significant attention to data security and the cybersecurity practices currently employed across both the public and private sectors.

At the roundtable, it was identified that handing over personal information to governments will always be a significant issue for some members of the community, so it's crucial that everything possible is done to make data collection as secure and transparent as it can be.

"It's called sovereignty over identity. I get to tell you who should be able to see what about me. The idea that government would have a single version of me and control that version of me is anathema, and it's the opposite of what Service NSW does," one expert said.

Service NSW was identified by several attendees as a good example of data handling practices by a government. Those present agreed that users of Service NSW are made aware of what aspect of their identity the state government has access to at any point in time, and are given control over which agency can see it.

A number of experts at the roundtable said that there is a risk that people will not use a service like myGov if they don't know what data is being accessed and why, and that these data security issues will only become more prominent in the future.

Government agencies should only receive the data that they expressly need to deliver effective services, attendees established, with the collection of any unnecessary data having a significant impact in the trust in these services.

Conclusion: An opportunity to deliver better services to Australians

It was widely agreed at the roundtable that the myGov User Audit presents an important opportunity to develop an improved service that benefits all Australians, particularly those who most need to access the government services available through myGov.

A number of attendees with direct experience said that focusing on the needs of Australians with disabilities and other marginalised members of the community will ensure that myGov is a better service for all users, one that is simpler and more efficient.

To ensure this is done effectively, these people and their needs must be placed at the forefront of the current review and in any future developments or changes to the myGov service.

This will also help to address the widespread perception that myGov is currently too complex and clunky, with participants saying any new design should focus on transparency and a more cohesive user experience for everyone.

The redesign of myGov also offers a chance for local SMBs to participate in the build of a significant national platform, benefitting local industry and ultimately delivering a better product at a lower cost, the roundtable heard. Active efforts are required to open up the procurement process and ensure local companies can compete with larger global firms.

The industry experts present said that data handling and security needs to be a central concern for myGov going forward, particularly in light of the significant data breaches that have affected millions of Australians in 2022. Australians increasingly want control over what data they give to public and private sector entities, including which specific agencies can access each piece of data.

Service NSW was seen as the gold standard for data collection and transparency, and was given as an example the federal government could follow with myGov.

The roundtable participants agreed that myGov is a crucial service that can be hugely useful and beneficial for all Australians, particularly the most marginalised people in our society. However, many people are also currently finding myGov too complex and difficult to use.

The audit of myGov offers a huge opportunity to address these concerns and develop a service that benefits all Australians.

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