

Building a User Research Compensation Process from the Ground Up in the City of Saint Paul

A Digital Service Network Spotlight

DSN Spotlights are short-form project profiles that feature exciting work happening across our network of digital government practitioners. Spotlights celebrate our members' stories, lift up actionable takeaways for other practitioners, and put the artifacts we host in the DSN Resource Library in context.

Background

As government teams around the country work toward establishing policies, processes, and practices for human-centered design, a common hurdle many face is reaching constituents for research. This hurdle shows up in different ways across various contexts in government settings, from challenges getting in touch with people generally, to ensuring the organization is reaching vulnerable communities, to simply being able to directly pay people for their time when they participate in research.

Finding authorization to compensate community members for research participation—commonly referred to as “UX (or user experience) compensation”—has emerged as a universal challenge across all levels of government, and is an area of focus for the Digital Service Network. As we all work to make it easier for governments to better manage research operations internally (recruitment, compensation, etc.), we also need to find ways to reach the people we serve to inform how we design and deliver government services.

To learn more about practical approaches in government human-centered design, we spoke to Ashley O'Brien, user experience designer for the City of Saint Paul, MN, about the flexible and resourceful approach she took to reach people across the city.



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Small, incremental win in Saint Paul

“I don’t view the resolution as a standalone story—I see it as a part of a million different stories.”

As the user experience designer, O’Brien faced the challenge of how to compensate community members for their time when participating in research. In her daily work, she saw how critical it was to get permission to use public funds to incentivize and compensate community members who participated in user research so that it could **expand who would be able to contribute**. While the City has engaged community members who volunteer their time, these unpaid feedback opportunities undervalue input from underserved communities.

Getting organizational buy-in and exploring available pathways for compensation

O’Brien’s initial inquiry about compensation for research participation faced institutional barriers and led to the recommendation of using vendors, which would greatly limit scalability and institutionalization of enterprise research operations. She continued to advocate for developing an **in-house recruitment process**, bringing others in the organization onboard with the benefits of intentional and scalable user recruitment services. Coincidentally, there was an upcoming design-led project to modernize a digital event management service which presented an opportunity to make a case for in-house user recruitment capacity. This was of particular importance as it created a business case to build capacity for an equity-focused recruitment practice and initiate new pathways for compensating co-creators.

In considering the various approaches, O’Brien reached out to a City attorney who was able to identify similarities between participant compensation practices and other community-based initiatives that obtained permission to use City funds. O’Brien explained that they wanted to find a method to recognize the value of user insights and fairly compensate community experts for their contributions in design processes. That meant they wanted to find ways to provide compensation and avoid burdensome paperwork that could deter people from participating in the design of public services. Through these discussions, they determined that a council resolution would provide an immediate and flexible solution to enable participant honorariums.

Equity as a key driver in resolution development

The next phase of the process involved collaborating with an office management assistant who helped structure the resolution in alignment with past resolutions that approved the use of City funds. They analyzed past resolutions that were approved and reverse engineered the format to create **a novel user recruitment services resolution**. The user recruitment services resolution centers equity in service delivery and recognizes the importance of perspectives from underserved audiences.

In drafting the resolution, they made a clear stance that this approach would directly support the City’s strategic objective to improve digital services and build a city where everyone can thrive.

“I want our practice to be equity based. This resolution was a part of that. We made our consent form digital to make it easier to sign and track, we offered a device for testers to use, we offered to help set up an email address to accept the test session invite—we made continuous effort to make participation equitable and inclusive,” O’Brien said.

Finding a common language that was plain and aligned with brand standards was an additional hurdle. Many stakeholders in the organization were uncomfortable using the word “user” in communication to the public. The team is continuously working to evolve enterprise culture to advance from the agreed-upon term “tester” to push toward a more general “user” identifier.

Resolution approved three years in a row without delay or pushback

After submitting the resolution, **it was approved in just two months**, allowing the department to directly compensate community members for their participation in research. This led to the next stage of work where O'Brien created a compliant, scalable and flexible in-house user recruitment strategy. The approach aimed to include users with the greatest barriers (using an equity-based sampling methodology), retain protected participant data (in a payment tracking spreadsheet with unique identifiers), and a procurement workflow (to mail gift cards directly to research participants).

The resolution has a one-year time frame and has been **reapproved each year following the initial approval**. O'Brien's department is still refining the repeatable process to brief the City Council ahead of the approval meeting, building interest organically through informal inquiries and conversations. This low-friction pathway has also caught the attention of other jurisdictions who have a shared interest in institutionalizing in-house user research recruitment capacity.

Key outcomes

This small, incremental win led to a number of impactful outcomes:

+ Enhanced research capacity

Having the resolution in place removed institutional blockers by justifying user research in the design of digital services and getting enterprise buy-in to recruit users in an equitable manner. The approach builds upon a paradigm shift from compliance to best practices. Emergent limitations in this near-term approach are made visible and create understanding of the greater opportunity (and roadmap ahead) to operationalize an enterprise community compensation model.

+ Equity embedded into the research process

The resolution opened the door for people who are less likely to volunteer to help improve government services and made a logical case to include perspectives of underserved communities. The ability to compensate research participants reflects the department's recognition of the unique value of users' voices and perspectives. It also scratched the surface of the untapped potential of co-creation and inclusive participatory design practices

+ Greater awareness and visibility about user research

As leaders talk about user research recruitment and budgets allocate spending for participant compensation, ROI of user research is now part of the conversation for the first time. The resolution gives user experience citywide visibility and recognizes Saint Paul as an industry leader in the field of civic innovation each year. This resolution served as a tangible work product to help people outside of the research process learn how user experience design works, see the importance of user experts, and become curious how participatory design can solve business problems.

+ New relationship building opportunities

This process was cross-disciplinary (including legal, communications, community engagement, business solution services, and procurement) and has helped strengthen connections and design collaborations across departments. In particular it has helped teams see where user research can take the place of inefficient design practices happening across the City.

Lessons learned

Timing is key. City leadership was in favor of this approach to improve digital services and consider technology services through an equity lens.

- + Advice: Assess organizational readiness for equity-focused approaches and align research operations with timely solution requests and broader equity initiatives.

Look out for allies who can help. Partnerships with the City's legal and finance stakeholders made the resolution possible. Engaging City leaders for communications and community engagement helped align UX work with the associated business functions and plant a seed for future partnerships.

- + Advice: reach out to your jurisdiction's legal counsel for assistance addressing institutional blockers and consult procurement stakeholders to ensure funding operations are made possible in alignment with the resolution.

Significant value can come from being open to small, timely, incremental wins. Trust that progress is possible, even if a scalable solution is fundamentally out of reach. O'Brien prioritized business value and capacity building in the resolution approach. It was apparent the resolution would not solve all of Saint Paul's user recruitment obstacles, but the resolution reflected a greater hope and shift to a more intentional and inclusive way to consider and involve users in design processes. For the past three years, the resolution has demonstrated a systematic approach the City never knew was possible. Every year more people understand the value that community compensation adds to in-house recruitment approaches. When the organization is ready to scale, the department has demonstrated success and foundational capabilities to help inform and structure an enterprise implementation.

- + Advice: be open to small-scale solutions that demonstrate the value of inclusive design practices. Demonstrated wins help make a case and inform for larger enterprise solutions that build upon key foundational capabilities.

Celebrate scrappiness. This story also highlights less glamorous opportunities that can get overlooked or underappreciated when trying to address what can feel like insurmountable challenges.

As O'Brien described it: "Drawing parallels across domains and applying best practices on the fly to seize available opportunities is an essential skill for driving innovation."

Using available resources to challenge the status quo, O'Brien was able to approach a common problem with proven solutions to assert a core value of equity in research.

- + Advice: Honor professional scrappiness and see what solutions others can help you test out.

Special thanks to Ashley O'Brien who shared her journey with us and provided thoughtful review for this piece.

Resources and artifacts

To see how this work was put into practice, explore the following assets in the [DSN Resource Library](#):

- + [City of Saint Paul's User recruitment services resolution 2024](#)
- + [City of Saint Paul's User testing for community focused design sign up page](#)
- + [Resident Engagement Resources from the Civic User Testing Group](#)