ARRIVAL ADVISOR: DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION LESSONS FROM A MOBILE APP

Jennifer Freeman is CEO of PeaceGeeks. She has led the technology nonprofit's strategy to scale, working with newcomers, policymakers and nonprofit leaders to explore the enabling conditions for innovation and digital transformation to create more modern, efficient, human-centred migration systems. Prior to joining PeaceGeeks, Jen worked for the UN and international nonprofits in zones of conflict and refugee settlements, and spent 10 years leading programs at the Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice, and a professor at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies.

At a time when the country is committing to significantly increase immigration targets, the push to create a more modern, efficient, open and agentic journeys for newcomers is more urgent than ever. New technology and hybrid service delivery will be central components of the sector's digital transformation. This article draws on PeaceGeeks' tech expertise and 6+ years developing and scaling Arrival Advisor (AA), an award-winning, multilingual mobile app that provides newcomers to Canada with recommended information and services tailored specifically to their needs, circumstances, and immigration status, to offer lessons learned, recommendations and potential risks for the sector and its main funder to consider at this time of rapid digital transformation.

Multiple research and policy reports have demonstrated the demand for and benefits of a 21st century digital settlement experience for newcomers to Canada.[1] At a time when the country is committing to significantly increasing immigration targets, the push to create a more modern, efficient, open and agentic journey for newcomers is more urgent than ever.

Five years ago, awareness of persistent information gaps led PeaceGeeks to build Arrival Advisor (AA), a mobile app that provides newcomers to Canada with recommended information and services tailored specifically to their needs, circumstances, and immigration status. Designed with newcomers, community service providers, and coordinating organizations, AA sought to increase accessibility of both pre- and post-arrival information through a free, trusted, multilingual, mobile app.

As of January 2023, Arrival Advisor has over 19,000 downloads, and around 1,000 monthly active users. In just over three years since its launch, it has been downloaded by users in 153 countries.

Immigration Refugee and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and the sector are currently preparing for the federal Call for Proposals (CFP) in 2024, with a focus on the digital transformation of the sector. PeaceGeeks' experience developing and scaling Arrival Advisor offers a number of relevant insights, practically, for organizations seeking to develop digital tools, and for the government's strategy to successfully support digital transformation.

ARRIVAL ADVISOR FROM DESIGN TO SCALE

At PeaceGeeks, over 80 per cent of our team are first generation or newcomer designers, product managers, and developers with lived experience of the challenges of finding

reliable, trusted and up-to-date information when arriving in a new country. According to the 2015 Vancouver Immigrant Survey, 1 in 3 newcomers were unaware of services and resources available to them. In 2016, seven municipal districts across the Lower Mainland identified access to information as a top barrier for immigrant resettlement.

Having worked with UNHCR to develop a multilingual service-mapping product for people fleeing conflict in Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey, PeaceGeeks queried whether a similar product would have value for newcomers to Canada.

In 2017 PeaceGeeks was one of 10 recipients of Google Canada's Impact Challenge award for Arrival Advisor. The flexible, innovation-focused grant allowed PeaceGeeks to spend 18 months working with advisory committees of newcomers, settlement partners, Local Immigration Partnerships, tech advisors and local government, to design, build and test the app. It launched in BC in March 2019, and scaled to Manitoba in January 2022. In November 2021, Arrival Advisor was one of 10 global recipients of the United Nations Intercultural Innovation Award, from the UN Alliance of Civilizations and BMW Group, and has been approached by governments and nonprofits in the US, UK, Poland, Germany and Finland to explore replication to other countries.

GUIDEPOSTS AND PITFALLS

Through the process of developing Arrival Advisor, and in the course of working with settlement organizations keen to replicate similar solutions, recurring themes emerged, which offer strategic and practical focal points for the digital transformation of the sector:

DESIGN

A central component for the creation of digital tools like Arrival Advisor, is the inclusion of robust user discovery, user interface (UI), and user experience (UX) design expertise. Principles of human-centered design (HCD) mirror concepts familiar to a settlement sector, such as client centricity. Human centered design involves continuously discovering and seeking to understand the perspective of the person who is experiencing the problem; then designing a useful solution which truly responds to their needs. HCD involves interacting with the user and bringing them in every step of the way. Arrival Advisor has relied on four advisory committees (Tech, Frontline, Newcomer and Strategic) for ideas, input and feedback to the design and ongoing feature development of the app.

Crucially, the HCD process extends beyond the rich skills and experience that settlement organizations bring from designing and delivering client-centered programs offline. This is because including a digital interface changes the interaction. HCD requires first surfacing and checking assumptions of the client and the product team (in this case tech developers and settlement providers), and suspending our own experience of a user's problem offline, to allow for unknown variables to emerge once a technological interface is added. For example, a service provider could be familiar with client needs regarding first language mental health support. A desire to extend these supports to more clients in other regions may indicate an online platform as a possible solution. But in the absence of a discovery phase that explores e.g. a client's accessibility and trust in the security of digital platforms, moving a service online could prove an ineffective solution if users aren't comfortable discussing mental health over a computer.

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PARTNERSHIPS

A core differentiator in Arrival Advisor's concept was that it sought to avoid "reinventing the wheel" with respect to information that was already being created, and maintained from reliable, trusted sources. This required a large network of content and data partners to ensure the app could maintain relevance, with up-to-date information, and provide value to partners by publicizing their content to newcomer audiences in a high quality, continually improving and maintained app.

As PeaceGeeks is not a direct service provider, it was not incentivised to direct users to its own programs, but rather, be a neutral information source to allow newcomers to navigate information and services on the app from any/all local service providers.

As the sector embarks on building new platforms, there is a need to foster more mutually-beneficial partnerships with organizations both inside and outside the sector, and with newcomers not only at, but advising the table.

FUNDING

From concept to build, successful technology must remain agile, with a commitment and investment in ongoing iteration and development. Digital tools that do not change and adapt to their users, to new technology, and as users' use of

those technologies changes, quickly and inevitably become obsolete.

This presents a particular challenge for nonprofits within the settlement sector, due to funding models which are often time-bound, project-based, and do not often provide the necessary flexibility to build effective technology. Particularly important will be the provision of funding for discovery (allowing certain outcomes to be decided post-award, rather than at the proposal stage), sustainable funding for long term development, and flexible funding that allows for continual iteration. Arrival Advisor has been fortunate to receive funding from a number of flexible, innovation-focused funds, which have been instrumental in our ability to maintain a roadmap for the app that continually listens to, and centers newcomers' pain points.

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KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF SETTLEMENT

1. **Invest in the creation of a digital ecosystem.** A robust digital ecosystem ensures everyone is able to find the same accurate, up-to-date information anywhere they look. Government's concerted efforts to reduce duplication of funding can inadvertently result in a limited number of information silos, leaving other sources to become outdated and inaccurate, and opening space for confusion and misinformation to proliferate. Sources of truth can thus be strengthened by the funding of multi-channel digital dissemination across platforms, communities and languages.

2. **A digital transformation requires changes to IRCC's grants and contribution system.** Grants to support the sector's digital transformation will need to be flexible enough to accommodate the design and sustainable, iterative development of technology and digital tools. In particular, funding for ongoing user testing will ensure digital tools stay effective and relevant to the needs of the user.

3. **Incentivize collaboration and customization by funding interoperable systems.** One way to reduce competition and encourage collaboration, co-learning and customization is by funding tech systems to be interoperable.

4. **Invest in systems to support future crises now.**

Canada's commitment to support people affected by the humanitarian crises in Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine created urgent service and information needs. Following interviews with Ukrainian citizens pre- and post-arrival, PeaceGeeks was able to quickly add features to Arrival Advisor, such as a CUAET visa filter for services, and a Compare Canadian Cities tool to address Ukrainians' desire to compare cities based on their priorities. Digital resources can be adapted quickly and efficiently once built, and if invested in now, will be ready to support Canada's humanitarian response to future crises.

CONCLUSION

As (IRCC) and the sector continue to deliberate the design of CFP 2024, Arrival Advisor's experience offers a number of insights into what has worked well, and what may be missing, as we continue on our audacious process of digital transformation.

REFERENCE

1. Lambert, M. and Javadji, Z. (Aug 5. 2022) A digital transformation can make Canada's immigration system world-class. https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/august-2022/digital-transformation-immigration-system/