

TO: Summer 2015 Interviewees about Code for America Brigades

FR: John Stephens

RE: Summary of Interview Data – Government officials’ contact and assessment of interaction with brigades in Hampton Roads, Charlotte, Durham, and Raleigh

DT: August 28, 2015

Thanks for your time over the summer for your impressions of the respective brigades seeking to use government open data for new applications.

This is a brief coverage of the findings (despite the length!). I am preparing a longer form for dissemination via Code for America communication avenues and for discussion at the Code for America Summit in October. Another version will add more theory on public participation for publication in a public administration journal.

Some particulars about the pool of interviewees are at the end.

Let me get straight to the highlights. The *Illustrations* are from interview notes.

Rewarding aspects of communicating, working with Brigades

1. Enthusiasm

Illustration: We don’t often find very good ways to engage highly technical volunteers. This was a new spin on volunteering. One thing that I love about the group is that they are happy to keep plugging away and don’t need a lot of handholding.

2. Innovation – new ideas, new vision

Illustrations:

- a) Innovative, responsive, inclusive and willing to share amongst each other
- b) Code kids not afraid to share half-baked ideas. So different than government or private sector. This is a valuable lesson they brought to us. Share ideas half way through, the world doesn’t end.
- c) Human-centered design – new to our internal IT staff and all the government

3. Smart people

Illustration: Their folks are crazy smart and think so differently than me.

4. Involving young people [and those less involved in government]

Illustration: We are tapping an entire group of folks who were unengaged with the government. Lady with purple hair talking to city government officials-it’s awesome!

5. Connections and learning [two-way learning]

Illustrations

- a) Opening people's eyes to the new volunteer opportunities in the world. Highly skilled volunteers serving in different roles that we have not seen before
- b) We have them help us do assessments for our department [RE: open data choices]. We see that as partnering with them – need to have them onboard

6. Awareness, publicity and recognition [of open data, open source and increase profile of government services through apps]

Illustrations

- a) Opportunity to promote what we are doing and build momentum [for our program]
- b) I owe them so much. It brought more awareness to our [X] programs. We were considered having cutting edge technology ... and I am so not that person!
- c) Brigade looking back at what [I and colleagues] have done. We get kudos for all the work we've done. Folks are recognizing that [our data/IT outreach] has wealth of data that is useful. We are leaders in enabling our data. People take pride in quality of data and making sure that metadata is available. It's nice to be recognized from the outside

7. Diversity [of views by brigade members and characteristics of people in brigades]

Illustrations

- a) Brigade – lots of walks of life – connected to community in different ways.
- b) The unique thing is volunteerism. Employees say, “Why would people not get a paid job?” This isn't the case with Code for America members. They change people's perception of volunteerism as we understand more about millennials, how they work, what they want, etc.
- c) Pretty cool to see that they have turned volunteerism into a club, a hangout kind of thing that is fun and flexible. The Code is very millennial friendly-they can do it behind their computer screen, a couple hours a week, with their friends

8. Community input

Illustrations

- a) I have been using it as a way to get feedback on what “citizens” are interested in. I use it as a proxy for what folks care about and I want to use technology for what they care about.
- b) We gave them kudos – they got us thinking differently about [X kind of] data, citizen interests, how to present and use. They helped us see the possibilities of data, we had a vision that was too narrow. They helped us see how citizens might view it.

9. App created – works well, more credibility

Illustrations

- a) We got the app out. People use it.
- b) Scalability/adapt an app from one place to another
- c) Higher credibility for Brigade app vs. government: If the [X government agency] generated the app, it would not have as much credibility
- d) Functionality and language accessibility: I like the geofunction. A [language] translation was built in and that was good.

10. Support, use of open data [helps government interest in transparency, investing in open data]

Illustrations

- a) Brigade – has a can-do attitude; hopefully our data release/interface will spur something on their end, RE: using the open budget data
- b) Catalyst for launching open data initiative
- c) It helps push us towards open data
- d) I am a real transparent [government] guy so this helped me push that agenda

11. High value of brigade work compared to private sector [free/cheap compared to market rate]

Illustrations

- a) Another group developing apps that we don't have capacity, time, resources to develop. For example, the [Particular app 1] and [Particular app 2]
- b) Idea put forth – moved quickly – low/no cost – in space of weekend was a result. I was fascinated that anyone would give up their weekend to develop an app for [my agency] -- they would do it on their own time. Their only reward – their personal satisfaction
- c) Community betterment - See them as doing productive work and bettering the community. I have been “a champion without doing much.”
- d) Stronger outcome than “filtered” private company data: Open data/app from the brigade is not like this. It is real data, repackaged. And isn't biased. It is a clean presentation of what is out there.
- e) It was all pro bono so we were flexible. We were going to make that happen. Our quote was \$50K for creating this [app] and this was a chance to get it done for free

12. Benefit back to staff, and “meet needs, but not control”

Illustrations:

- a) The data can be used internally as well as externally.
- b) Originally, I thought benefit was a specific project, but the real reward was unleashing potential among staff re: open data

- c) There is potential for government not to have to do some things. [My agency] provides data to Google and as a result they get a free live data feed. We are looking for opportunities to create value, meet needs even though we don't control it. How can the government share or step back without having to control it?

13. Build relationships, Bridging among groups, jurisdictions

- a) To community

Illustrations

- a) I think it is wonderful that those guys share their free time. Rewarding for citizens and the city because they are volunteering their time and expertise.
- b) The process is the project. Work is to build relationships to share ideas and resources
- c) Helps my work on [X community] Advisory Board and am interested in being creative with them

- b) Within government

Illustration: When talking with my internal customers, I always have my eye on the brigade for getting work accomplished

14. Related short-term events [i.e., brigade involved or other open data/civic IT interests such as Hack-a-thons sponsored by university, business, non-profit, CityCamp, etc.] give exposure to wider community of open data/ open source

Illustrations

- a) Connection to other civic IT people and events: getting plugged in to events like [Area X] Open Data Day
- b) Meeting wider community of open government resource pool

Comments from one interviewee: is part of move to expected digital services.

Illustration: Think about how younger and more tech-savvy people; we want digital services. We don't think of it in terms of technology – using devices. Not having to trudge down to city hall and with less than optimal customer service

A Good Point and a Challenge

Lack of structure, openness, depends on volunteers [interests, skills, communication about the project, follow-through] Because of high innovation makes them hard to work with

Illustration: One thing I love is that they [the brigade] are like the wild, wild west. There is little structure, no single group to go to vet stuff or to get concerns heard. It's very innovative. That innovativeness is exactly what can make them hard to work with. We don't always know where/who to go to with questions or comments like we do with our traditional groups.

Challenges, Barriers, the Downsides of communicating, working with Brigades

Two consistent categories of challenges:

- a) Government workers' time to devote to brigade – after hours, extra hours, and managing work priorities
- b) The clash of culture of government caution and brigade speed; lack of clear expectations and low accountability from a volunteer group, and start-stop-drop of particular brigade projects

Government workers' time

Illustrations:

- a) The fact that everyone has a full-time job and many have families so that is hard. Especially when we lost a person at work and I had to absorb that and that work involves off hours.
- b) Mainly, finding the time to be involved. I'd like to be more involved. I think folks look at involvement with the brigade as more work.
- c) We couldn't meet [with brigade project managers] until 6:30 p.m. so we definitely did dinner. Makes for a long day.
- d) People not interested in doing things after hours without being paid – no one has told that to be directly; just my feeling.
- e) Everyone now wants a piece of my time: the brigade and [other IT-community connections]. It will be easier once the data can be up and they can connect to it on their own.
- f) I do it outside my normal work hours (RE: brigade meeting, or work from home on data, email replies to /the brigade captain/, etc.). It is extra time, but I enjoy it. Some crossover – on some of my “at home work” may be mainstream work needs, but sidelight to brigade interests. About 3 hours/month.

Three interviewees referred specifically to being short-staffed in their unit, adding to their workload and the challenge of devoting time to brigade communication or projects.

Clash of Cultures

Seven interviewees identified contrasts of government caution, avoiding mistakes, and following procedures versus the Code for America//Brigade orientation toward Millennial fast-paced change, iterative release, rapid revision of apps, and creative ambiguity.

Illustrations:

- a) *Brigade as a friendly collaborator* – but need to respect government rules and norms. Everyone wants to get things done. RE: agile methods and quick wins vs. Government – things need to be involved, vetted. Example: going through process of making public

[particular departments'] records. I need to work with data holders; has to go through business office, legal office, etc. Each person must sign off.

- b) *Different emphasis on values:* Innovation [Code for America] vs. Accountability [email as public record, being in the public eye].
- c) *Example – slow government vs. innovative/individualistic brigade member – how best to acquire government data:* brigade member X wanted to get to property tax data. It is available as a text file you can download. Member X was not interested in text file – instead created a web scraper to take 100K+ pieces of property data and downloaded it that way. Was a bad way to do it; he wanted to do it his/her way = “it was her/his style” – liked figuring out how the web scraper would work. The Web scraper created delays and lags in people accessing the website. Raised concerns by government folks.

A subset of this concern is about data release and concerns by government data holders

Illustrations:

- a) The problem is sharing data. Many people at the city are very scared to share data. When brigade wants data on external sites it is not an issue; the issue is their data requests that we don't already provide to the public
- b) Comparison to neighboring jurisdiction which provides certain data: We tried to do that a few years ago and the [X] Department said no. Until the [top leaders] mandate that all departments make data open, it is going to be like that.
- c) Brigade depends on city data, [examples noted] those departments are not keen on open data for various reasons.

Interviewees identified the risk of negative outcomes of data use (either misinterpretation of data, or showing the government in a bad light) as concerns by some of their colleagues, but rarely by the interviewees themselves.

Illustration: We are always worried people will use the data inappropriately. For example, crime data: people take it and publish it on the web.

Expectations and Accountability

The flexibility and innovation of the brigade can lead miscommunication. While appreciating the volunteer energy and interest, several interviewees noted a gap for how to define the working relationship for clearer expectations and accountability.

Illustrations:

- a) The accountability is confusing. There's no contract and no list of deliverables. I just have to make myself available, hoping this will get done eventually. No regular communication system. I just let them go at their own pace. My model is to provide maximum resources then sit back and let them do it. I want to be a facilitator or catalyst
- b) I don't feel like I can ask as many questions as I would if it was staff. I have a feeling that there is not enough time to intrude because of their volunteer time.

- c) There are no rules of engagement, no documents of how to proceed. Those sorts of things are just nonexistent.
- d) Still defining what the meaningful, tangible deliverable will be, [RE: X topic area]. I've tried to chunk off pieces to help people understand and guide. Still in flux.
- e) Working with the brigade is hard. It is hard because there is no requirement on delivery or end product. Government doesn't have a ton of deliverables anyway, but they have none. They are trying to implement, but they are struggling. We've had ideas, worked for a couple hours, and nothing has taken off.

Two interviewees, who are committed to working with their brigades, noted miscommunication and not getting the right fit on how to share action, resources and publicity. They wanted to "credit" the brigade, but there were glitches such that they ended up doing more of the work than is best for an effective partnership with the brigade.

Project Selection, Fit, and Follow-through

Illustrations:

- a) Brigade goals do not always map onto open data goals
- b) At [a civic IT event] I was on a team to build an app to let folks know about locations of [a resource important to low-income residents]. We won that contest, but the project dissolved kind of quickly, so I pitched it to the brigade group. It got onto the board as a priority project. I noticed if there isn't a champion to cheer the project on it gets pushed aside.
- c) Bias toward new projects – hard to add people/enthusiasm to existing projects. How do we get enough people to stick to the project? There is always a new project more exciting than what you are working on. People don't want to replicate their day jobs so volunteers are biased to the newest thing.
- d) Finding a problem that will get their full attention and sticking with it until completion. The commitment part is hard. Wanting to follow through even if it gets attention up front.
- e) Individuals in brigade – pet projects. Some are compatible for data sets, others not.

Less common or unique, but other notable challenges identified

1. Concern about volunteers putting government jobs at risk

Illustration: In 2008 [X] government employees were fearful because they were worried that volunteers would take their job. It has changed over last couple years. Now it is much more receptive to volunteer culture. [Note from John Stephens – the severe economic recession of 2008+ may be a unique factor]

2. Trying to balance help to brigade with government work role

Illustration: I am philosophically in line with the Brigades, but other hat is the government one so I have to balance.

3. Government supervisors discouraging involvement with brigade

Illustration: Some have said they would get in trouble with their managers if they got involved with the brigade. Not sure if it is their perception, or if they have been told.

4. Seeking government blessing of brigade app, or exaggerating a relationship to a government official

Illustrations:

- a) Overly eager to have “city seal of approval” for something not ready for prime time. There is political blow back for that. Brigade members do not react favorably – when told “your software does not meet our standards.”
- b) Being “leveraged: - referenced and presented in a way that is a bit inflated. Is common for local government workers in community engagement having various relationships with people and groups often have a role of “being leveraged.” Being cited as being involved/supporting something when that may be an overstatement – but is not a bad thing.

Advice to Government Officials

Interviewees were asked to advise their counterparts in general, not specific to their jurisdiction. What are better or worse ways to interact with civic IT brigades? What are your lessons?

Their responses could be directed to one of three kinds of government workers:

- a) Top administrators,
- b) Information Technology agency leaders and staff, or
- c) Program staff (with no special IT duties or expertise).

Some interviewees provided general advice.

General Advice

Mixed views – focusing on relationship, focusing on output of apps

A. Value of good process and relationship

- Be open, have an open mind
- Getting government outside the box, put on “the citizen hat”

Illustrations:

- My advice is they can be really valuable to city folks for outreach, employment, and mentoring. Having citizens voices heard is key
- Just get in there and do it. Brigade/open data community is very accepting of newcomers and people of “low skills.”

B. Risks of working with volunteers

1. Patience
2. Deliverable uncertain

Illustration: Realizing people are volunteers, which means deliverables might not come. Process is the project. It is about building relationships and that is the most important thing

Advice for Top Administrators

Leaders should demonstrate the importance of connection to the brigade

- As part of openness to new ideas, exploration
Illustration: if you are like me, and not aware of people like the Code for America brigades are out there “peek under the rug” and find them. They provide valuable services. They offer low or no and reasonable costs.
- To Staff – OK for their exploration [authorize some of their work time; not just after-hours interaction]
Illustration: Must lead from the top; make it clear about what people are empowered to do
- Open Source/ Open Data – part of values of transparency and community engagement
Illustrations:
 - a) Agency heads – cultivate a true culture of transparency. Not just a “gee here is our website with stuff on it” – any and all data is paid for and owned by the public. So I’d say: while you may not understand technical details – have a CEO level appreciation of public data is useful beyond the mere collection and internal use.
 - b) Leadership should be creative and strongly support open source. Open source even more important than open data. Also for more customization of web applications vs. just sticking with enterprise software. Can get more of what we want/need.
- To brigade – valued relationship/partnership [with leaders, including elected at key events]

Opportunity for Volunteer labor, skilled help – be open, explore

Mutual education and problem-solving resource

Illustrations

- a) I’d advise them to go to [a one-night civic IT event]. Read up on all the literature involved: twitter, blogs, and articles. Stay on top of where this open data thing is going. So they can support the rest of us as we fit into this world and provide them with what they would like
- b) Know that brigaders are problem solvers. They aren’t asking you to do anything. They are willing to come up with lightweight apps to solve community problems. They will make it in a way that works with them

Be ready for political risk – potential use/criticism via analysis of data

Illustration: There is a corresponding burden on local government and others to deal with some of that confusion that some of this will generate. You have to expect it and know that the [activist groups] are downloading it and will poke at it. Everyone will want to interpret it. They are entitled to probe, talk about it, map it, etc.

The right level of connection of government officials to the brigade: Different views

- a) Mid-level – for appropriate kinds of exploration (some standing in the organization, but also has discretion to explore)
- b) New and younger staff (more open, less set in ways; longer-serving staff seem less inclined to innovate)
- c) Senior – need upper level perspective and management/control over tensions between government and brigade; need power to influence various government agencies/data holders

Advice for Information Technology Leaders and Staff

Risks OK – worth it, can be managed

- a) Part of increased distribution of data and open source programming – simply part of larger wave of decentralization
- b) Learning and Exploration – valuable to government IT staff

Illustrations

- o Practice speaking another language: crosspollination of standard programmers, app programmers, and GIS folks. Programmers don't know a lot of GIS stuff and they reinvent things they can just go to the API to and get it
- o Can see it as joint mentorship and assistance to people in community – government and brigade members helping folks on technical skills/using public data
- c) Can do Quality Assurance – brigade as a resource, not threat
- d) Same technical; IT minds – colleagues and brigade

Illustration: It helped to have highly technical folks on brigade. I wasn't expecting the work to get done so quickly.

Advice for Program Folks

Be open, bring your agency's problems

- a) To brigade
- b) To government liaison to the brigade

Illustration: Come with your problems or challenges, things you need to get done. We will work with your legacy systems; will get lots of ideas – you can decide what to do. We try, OK to fail, keep swinging.

Need IT interpreter to communicate effectively: a government person (could be from within IT or otherwise) to bridge “code-speak” and government program needs, parameters.

Illustration: You need to have people like [IT staff person] to help translate particular agency goals into their frame of reference. I didn’t find it difficult to communicate with them. I explained to [IT staff person] so he can explain to them

Brigade as potential users to test/focus groups, RE: government IT changes and open data development

Data about Interviewees

- Interviews were conducted in-person or by telephone. Most interviews greatly benefitted from Micah Guindon taking detailed notes while John Stephens led the interview.
- Interviews were conducted June 5 – August 17 and lasted from ten minutes to 50 minutes, with the majority in the 20-35 minute range.

Selection of interviewees via

- a) Information on Meet-up.com lists and brigade websites
- b) Observation at brigade meetings 2014-15
- c) Recommendations from brigade captains
- d) Referrals from interviewees

BRIGADE	Number of Interviewees	Notes
Code for Charlotte	10	
Code for Durham	7	
Code for Hampton Roads	9	One interview session had two people
Code for Raleigh/ Triangle Code for America	8	One interviewee serves as co-captain for Code for Durham
	Total = 34	

The largest set of job duties of interviewees relate to information technology. Some were GIS (geographic information system) specialists, others in database management or open data, or were upper level management of IT agencies.

Several interviewees came from other program areas: planning, neighborhood service, transportation, or health inspections. The highest level administrator interviewed was an assistant county manager. Some of the “unusual” areas of government work responsibilities were corporate communication and innovation, public art, and volunteer management.

Cross overs

One interviewee in summer 2015 was a consultant for developing an open data portal for two jurisdictions in this study. However, she/he was interviewed in his government contractor capacity 2012-15 at another jurisdiction on open data policy and implementation and connections to that jurisdiction's brigade.

Another interviewee became a brigade captain in 2014 and continues to hold that position, while in 2015 she/he became a government contractor on open data for a different jurisdiction.

Other Interview Data – Analysis Underway

- a) The interview questions included asking about what kind of factors affect a person's ability to interact or work with the brigade.
- b) I also had five interviewees who had less involvement with their respective brigades. I will analyze that information soon.