



We are big fans of [TEDTalks](#). If you have not visited the site, it works like a clearinghouse for free knowledge and ideas from some of the world's most inspired thinkers. TED itself is a not-for-profit organisation started in 1984 as a conference to bring together people from the spheres of technology, entertainment and design to share ideas. Since then its scope has broadened and along with two annual conferences it includes the Open Translation Project and TED Conversations, TED Fellows and TEDx programmes, and the annual TED Prize. At its heart, though, lies the TEDTalks video site that began as a simple attempt to share what happens at TED with the world. Talks were released online and rapidly attracted a global audience. In fact, the response was so enthusiastic that in 2007 the entire TED website was re-engineered around TEDTalks with the aim of giving everyone on-demand access to some of the world's most inspiring voices.

Code for America

✘ In March 2012 TEDTalks posted a talk by Jennifer Pahlka on the work being done by Code for America, which has a particular relevance in our field. Code for America, according to Pahlka, is like the Peace Corps for geeks. The idea is to get technology and design experts to take time off but instead of going into the Third World to go into city government to create apps and to show what is possible with today's technology.

The example she used was of fire hydrants in Boston that get snowed up in winter. The city authorities did not dig them out and residents, while they cleared their sidewalks, ignored them. A Code for America Fellow working at City Hall wrote a simple app for people to adopt a hydrant and if they dug it out they could name it. The app is now spreading virally. In Honolulu it is being used to ensure tsunami sirens are working and in Seattle to clear clogged storm drains.

Normally, says Pahlka, procuring software takes a couple of years. An app that takes a couple of days to write and then spreads virally suggests how governments could work better, like the internet, permissionless, open and generative.

Why is Code for America successful?

Since the start of information technology fifty years ago, successive generations of technologists and managers have tried to demystify and make IT more accessible. The common tension that persists between IT departments and their internal customers, however, is relevance. Technologists tend to believe the smarter the technology, the more interesting it is, whereas business managers are concerned only in what it can do to save time and resources.



Code for America is working well because the starting point is the problem to be solved. Its Fellows who are deployed into government offices set out to understand how problems arise and to identify the most effective way to solve them. Jennifer Pahlks' fire hydrant is the perfect example of how successful this approach can be. In addition, she is a charismatic leader who inspires and motivates as well as easing negotiations with civic offices that need help. The US, too, has a healthy community of developers with a culture of experimentation and a citizenry able to use and be part of new software-enabled services.

Underpinning all this is Open Source Software, which has contributed to the progress of cloud computing and social media that in turn have accelerated deployment of accessible software-enabled services.

Code for America absorbs Civic Commons

In the meantime, Code for America announced earlier this year that it is taking Civic Commons into its portfolio. This is a similar not-for-profit organisation set up to encourage governments to release the software developed on their behalf for peers to adapt for their own uses. The move comes as Civic Commons reaches the end of its current funding.

One result is that one of a very few large scale experiments in how to apply open source technology into government will largely be put on hold. Civic Commons' work in helping governments to build software that can be shared by other governments as well as to adapt the work of cities for other cities rather than contracting out for systems from scratch will be discontinued for the time being.