NEW YORK STATE

TECHNOLOGY SWAT TEAM PLAYBOOK

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INTRODUCTION

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, New York State quickly stood up a Technology SWAT Team led by the Office of Information Technology Services and Department of Financial Services to secure pro bono partnerships with the private sector to aid in the state's response efforts. The Tech SWAT effort brought in private sector experts to work on critical projects, assist in building new applications, and train NY State employees on technical skills necessary for responding to the crisis. You can learn more about the program at ny.gov/techswat.

This Playbook provides recommendations and guidelines for any government entity that is standing up a similar effort. This document also highlights challenges that government entities will want to consider when standing up and managing their SWAT teams.

Although much of the context throughout this document was written with the coronavirus response in mind, the Tech SWAT concept could be deployed in response to any crisis.

OVERVIEW

The Mission

Organize and mobilize additional resources to increase the capacity of frontline government workers and provide critical technology infrastructure for effective crisis response.

Why a SWAT Team?

The SWAT team concept is designed to leverage the technical, programmatic, and experiential expertise of small groups of volunteer technologists to solve mission-critical public challenges via rapid design or deployment of digital products.

The Golden Rule

Your SWAT Team and your process must prioritize lessening the burden on the front lines over everything else. Your goal is to help them – if you find that you are creating too much extra work or overhead for them, it's time to rethink your process or strategy.

IDENTIFYING CRITICAL PROJECTS

Critical projects should drive your outreach and discussions. Outreach across agencies dealing with the crisis can help identify these projects and executive support will also help lead your team to the places of highest need.

Think broadly. Applications and technical infrastructure will be needed, but a crisis also places a unique strain on communications. Go into every discussion with volunteers with one or several critical projects in mind.

New Builds in Direct Response to Crisis

These projects are revealed quickly based on immediate need. The timeline for new builds will be extremely aggressive. Take an agile approach. Get a product up and running that can serve a purpose and add to it over time. Ensure that your Chief Information Security Officer and cybersecurity team are heavily engaged from the start, even for awareness purposes.

Additional Strain on Existing Systems

Existing systems, for example servers supporting online applications for benefits or remote work platforms, will see dramatically increased demand during a crisis. This can also extend to something as simple as a critical website getting many times its usual traffic, which may also prompt discussions about usability and design.

Extending Normal Operations to New Locations

Responding to crisis means doing many of the same things you are used to doing, deploying a network, for example, in new locations on very short timelines.

Understanding Timeframe

Some projects are of such critical importance that your internal teams will be working on them and building them before a volunteer team can be truly onboarded. Even if volunteer technologists would be well suited to working on that project in principle, don’t expect to be able to slot them into it. Look at the projects your volunteers can meaningfully contribute to on a timeline that makes sense in the context of the larger crisis response efforts.

Challenges and Recommendations

> Standing up new systems or applications needs to be done quickly and internal teams may already be midstream before you can bring on volunteers to your SWAT Team.

> Needs can change due to shifting on-the-ground conditions. Assumptions that were correct yesterday may be wrong today. Check in daily.

> Look for new builds that can complement what has been stood up by your internal teams and work with those internal teams to ensure volunteer efforts function seamlessly with their own.

> Existing systems and applications will often be tied to internal agency processes. It is important to consider business logic questions at agencies that are experiencing additional strain on systems. In some cases, doing a rapid review of existing business logic will be helpful for building quality applications down the line.

> A rebuild may solve the problem in principle but consider the organizational and process components of that project before enlisting volunteers to rewrite a critical system.

> Communicate with your business partners to understand the full scope of the problem. There are likely constraints beyond technical capacity and bandwidth.

PROCESS OVERVIEW

Our end-to-end process from managing inbound offers through offboarding volunteers took some trial and error to finalize. Be prepared to be flexible as unexpected types of offers come in and new kinds of projects surface, but don't allow critical elements of your process (e.g. legal review) to fall away. We found the following to be the most effective process.

Lead Generation & Managing Inbound Offers

- A company or individual submits webform indicating interest.
  - If a lead came via email, we ask them to fill out the form as well to ensure our tracker has all leads. Avoid multiple sources of truth in differing repositories.
- Send an update to the program leadership team each day. This will be less necessary over time but is essential in the early weeks.
- Use project needs to identify potential partners and flag those companies for your legal team to provide a quick vet of potential conflicts and other issues.

In-Principle Agreement

- Leadership holds an intro call with company, possibly including technical lead, to determine if there is a good match between the company and the project and learn more about what the company is offering.
- If there is a project that can begin right away, a government representative follows up with a Project Commitment Document to clarify the proposed commitment of resources, product, etc.
- If company sends completed Commitment Document and there's green light from executive sponsors and project team, move to formalize the agreement.

Formal Agreement + Identifying Individuals

- Company and government legal departments work together to finalize legal agreement. You should have an existing template in place to facilitate agreements quickly over time.
- If providing staff to be onboarded for the project, the company identifies those employees and works with our end user services (EUS) representative for the next steps in the process.
- NYS technical advisors lead signoff on individuals and project structure.

Onboarding

- In consultation with legal and partner agencies, determine all compliance obligations that may be triggered, including training, security clearance, non-disclosure and business associate agreements.
- Hold onboarding call with volunteers and company representative(s).
    - Walk through expectations, project priorities, and expected communication cadence.
- Onboarding:
    - Volunteers will undergo standard Lean onboarding run by EUS.
    - Additional onboarding for project-specific needs done according to legal guidance.
- EUS confirms with program leadership and company leadership that onboarding was successful.

Execution, Monitoring, & Troubleshooting

- Project Managers manage the day-to-day operations of their projects, including volunteers working on them.
- Identify an internal product owner to own the project when the SWAT team has completed its work (very little should be built to be discarded after volunteers leave).
- Check in with project managers each day to identify any points of friction, problems, etc. and triage or elevate as needed. Ensure HR and Technical Advisors are on standby to advise.
- As projects end:
    - Account Manager works with technical advisors and project managers to identify transition and onboard to new projects if appropriate.
- Program leadership follows up with project manager to debrief on project, including measuring impact, cataloguing full monetary and other contributions, and ensuring any temporary systems or licenses are fully accounted.

Offboarding

- Program Leadership confirms with company that the volunteer service is ending.
- HR works with EUS to deprovision accounts and access. Collect all equipment and credentials.
- SWAT Team Leadership follows up with company to debrief on project and volunteer experience.

INTEGRATION WITH THE EXECUTIVE RESPONSE EFFORT

Importance of Executive Buy-In

Executive buy-in and integration with the existing emergency response effort is essential to allowing the effort to be stood up quickly and to make the project part of an agency's priorities.

Larger Volunteer and Response Initiatives

A Tech SWAT team will be one of many efforts responding in a crisis. Find out where you can integrate with the other efforts. In a crisis, you can't afford to duplicate efforts and you aren't going it alone. For example, your efforts may be generating many leads to support donations or procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE), so be ready to deploy an efficient routing mechanism to the proper internal contacts.

Challenges and Recommendations

- The technology response is one part of a larger response. Integration with the executive and the larger effort means that the technology SWAT teams need to make sense in that larger context.
- Make sure your frequency of communications comports with executive expectations.
- Work with the executive team to understand the most important information from their perspective and focus on delivering that information to them on a regular basis.

INTERNAL PARTNERS AND COMMUNICATIONS

Legal Partners

Identify strong internal legal partners and identify them early. The regulations surrounding volunteers and gifts will depend on the laws in your jurisdiction. Prioritize compliance early to avoid having to scramble later in the process when you would like to be starting work. Each individual project may have its own legal concerns. Establish a regular check-in with your legal team. Finally, if your SWAT team is launched during a formal declared emergency or crisis, work with your legal team to understand how that can support your ability to work with volunteers and execute quickly.

End User Services Partners

We recommend engaging with EUS early to help map out a plan from moving from the agreement phase of your engagement with a company to the onboarding of individuals onto critical projects. The program leadership will work closely to coordinate EUS, legal, and HR as needed.

Project Trackers

As we took on more projects, it became impossible for our initial team to track each of the projects in enough detail. We built a unified project tracker to pinpoint the status of all projects on a daily basis. We recommend building this into your plan from the beginning.

Communications Partners

We enlisted a communications expert early in our process to manage our anticipated public communication surrounding the response effort. Our expert was connected directly with companies as we worked with them to finalize their efforts to coordinate quotes and announcement timing. This person was also in direct contact with executive communications to coordinate with larger communications efforts. Lean on your organization's Communications Director or Public Affairs organization to identify that lead.

Technical Subject Matter Experts

Our technical subject matter experts helped communicate needs to our partners, identified the needed core skills – at a very detailed level – to execute on individual projects, and helped us vet volunteers as they came onto projects to make sure they were correctly aligned with projects.

HR Partners

Although the SWAT team is made of volunteers who are not government employees, we found it useful to connect with HR early in the process to flag potential issues for us.

We also recognized that onboarding was going to be a challenge and that having an HR skillset on our team would help with managing the process and managing the relationship with company HR representatives. Though this rarely, if ever, came up, it's also important to work with HR if gaps in performance or differing expectations arise among volunteers.

Information Flow

We recommend daily meetings with your leadership team as you stand up the SWAT Team. This team will be coordinating partnerships across departments and agencies and must be completely in sync on priorities and changes to the project landscape. Agencies and departments may not have clear lines of sight and communication and the leadership needs to ensure everyone on the project has access to the information they need.

INDUSTRY OUTREACH

Before we had even announced our effort, we had received offers from companies who wanted to offer pro bono products and services. We quickly put together a web form and began intake of offers widely.

Initial Outreach

Our interest form created a single point of entry for companies interested in volunteering to help with the crisis. We recommend moving to a single point as early as possible and having a member of your team responsible for tracking the incoming offers to raise on a daily basis to the SWAT Team leadership.

Follow-ups

We recommend establishing concrete commitments as soon as possible with a series of short follow ups. A small, concrete commitment is worth far more than a large but vague commitment to help when on urgent timelines.

Going Public

Communication is critical during a crisis and going public with your call for industry volunteers needs to be seen as part of the larger communication effort surrounding the crisis. This means integrating your communications efforts with the larger response effort.

Challenges and Recommendations

> As you get your SWAT Team effort up and running in response to a crisis, time is your limiting factor. You will likely have to solidify your process for identifying partners and volunteers as work is already beginning.

INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

It is critical to provide information to project and emergency managers in a way that allows them to make decisions quickly, efficiently, and without wasting their time. The SWAT Team's goal is to get them more resources to lessen the load, not add additional complications by helping manage the SWAT Team. Likewise, you must be prepared to brief your executive partners on outreach and project progress.

Communicating with Project Managers

Keep your communications with PMs brief. Clarify specific questions and needs and focus on information that will 1) allow program leads to get the information they need to help match companies to projects and 2) create a critical list of needed access and systems to ensure smooth onboarding onto the project. Consider the physical and capacity limitations that a PM is dealing with in the field and make yourself available during flexible timeframes to accommodate their schedule.

Communicating with Executive Leaders

We used a form to take in all incoming offers to volunteer and created a master spreadsheet and dashboard to quickly provide a program-level overview of our current volunteer leads to establish daily updates. To add more granularity over time, we included breakdowns of volunteer leads by skillsets, job titles, company, and location.

The SWAT Team's executive sponsors led the communication with the Statewide Task Force and other executive leaders involved in response efforts.

Challenges and Recommendations

> Err on the side of overcommunication. The SWAT Team structure is different than most government initiatives and assumptions about the way things usually work may not apply. Take the time to confirm your expectations.

MATCHING COMPANIES WITH PROJECTS

Although this might seem like one of the more natural elements of the project, managing the matching process was one of the most difficult parts of standing up our SWAT Team.

Project Prioritization

A short list of high-priority projects is one of the most critical documents to maintain. It will serve as a way to check quickly if a new offer for volunteers matches a need and serves as a program summary. We established daily meetings to prioritize projects and identify any project-related barriers to onboarding.

Project Matching

Technical leaders will help identify fits between the team or individuals a company is offering and a high-priority project. Finding a good match between team and project is critical to standing up solutions quickly and to the overall success of the initiative. The team needs to make rapid, effective decisions on this topic.

Challenges and Recommendations

> Many companies will offer teams with similar skillsets. It can be difficult to turn away a potential partner or ask them to wait while you find an appropriate project. Set clear expectations based on your needs during your initial communication.

> The SWAT Team's success is linked to managing and assigning resources. Make sure you're spending the time to think through the way your available resources – volunteer and otherwise – align with your needs.

> You must move quickly but avoid the impulse to move forward before you've truly identified a good match.

> Not every project makes sense for an external SWAT Team. Consider when an internal team is more appropriate, even if an external team is available.

ONBOARDING VOLUNTEERS

Not every project will involve formally onboarding volunteers. Even when formal onboarding is not required, make sure the project's workflow is clear and all access to systems is clearly understood.

Legal and Compliance Concerns and Overcoming Them

The primary legal concerns concerned ethics, compliance and liability. We built a legal check for ethical and compliance issues as soon as we had a project scope. We addressed liability through our engagement agreements.

Provisioning and Onboarding

We utilized our Lean onboarding process to get people on board as quickly as possible and had project managers provide additional information about needed access and software. We recommend engaging your EUS and legal teams as soon as possible to ensure swift onboarding that won't get bogged down at the last minute by unforeseen compliance or access issues.

Challenges and Recommendations

> Some work can be done without ever being traditionally "onboarded" but there may still be access provisioned at the project level. Any access given must meet legal and compliance standards and should be accounted for during the onboarding process before anyone begins work. To speed up progress, consider having your volunteers begin by doing an "outside looking in" analysis of the project or service they will work on and consider sharing public datasets to get them up to speed quickly.

OFFBOARDING VOLUNTEERS AND MEASURING SUCCESS

Managing Resources

Ensure that once a project has been completed (or a volunteer team's time has been exhausted), you communicate extensively with the PM to confirm the details of the offboarding. If a project is still mid-stream and will need to be resourced internally to go over the finish line, work closely with the PM to identify new internal resources to take over the project load. In a crisis, nothing should be dropped.

Assessing the Project

It would be easy to move from project to project at rapid pace with a focus on execution over documentation and reflection. However, it's essential you host an offboarding call or initiate email threads with the volunteer organization to thank them for their support, ask them for critical feedback, and request data on the overall volunteer effort's impact, including number of volunteers who participated, total hours volunteers, the fair market value of that contribution (this may be useful for future budgetary considerations), and the impact of the work. Put in the extra effort as soon as a project is complete before knowledge is forgotten.

Finally, developing a strong internal narrative of how the overall Tech SWAT effort was managed is critical for maintaining accountability with senior staff and continuing to lead future projects that may utilize untraditional models in government.

PROJECT BRIEF TEMPLATE

Project Briefs are a critical document for tracking all priority projects that your SWAT Teams will support. Project briefs should be a clearing house for data related to every project and your briefs will be used for grooming projects, giving access information to End User Support during onboarding, and doing technical feasibility reviews.

Project

Project Lead

Email

Phone Number

Partner

Project Overview

What is the problem? What is the solution needed?

Critical Project Tasks & Deliverables

Outline the critical tasks needed for your project. This will help us assign resources to your project. Be brief but specific.

Tasks *One sentence descriptions*

Task 1

Task 2

Task 3

Major Deliverables *One sentence descriptions*

Deliverable 1

Deliverable 2

Deliverable 3

Anticipated Timeline

Outline the following basic benchmarks (and others as you see fit)

Agreement on Project Brief, Workplan, and Deliverables: days

Minimum Viable Product or Version 1 is Delivered: days

User Testing or Review is Complete: days

Final Product is Deployed into Production: days

Technical Documentation is Shared with NYS Team: days

Project Offboarding OR Team is Redeployed on New Project: days

Needed Resources

Be as specific as possible, include as many as needed.
Ex. [NUMBER] – Title (e.g. 2 Front-End Developers (PHP)): Very Brief Description of Why Needed

Critical Systems And Applications To Access

Outline all the applications and systems that volunteers will need to access. This is essential for rapid onboarding.

Additional Relevant Information

Share any other relevant information, screenshots, or background information.