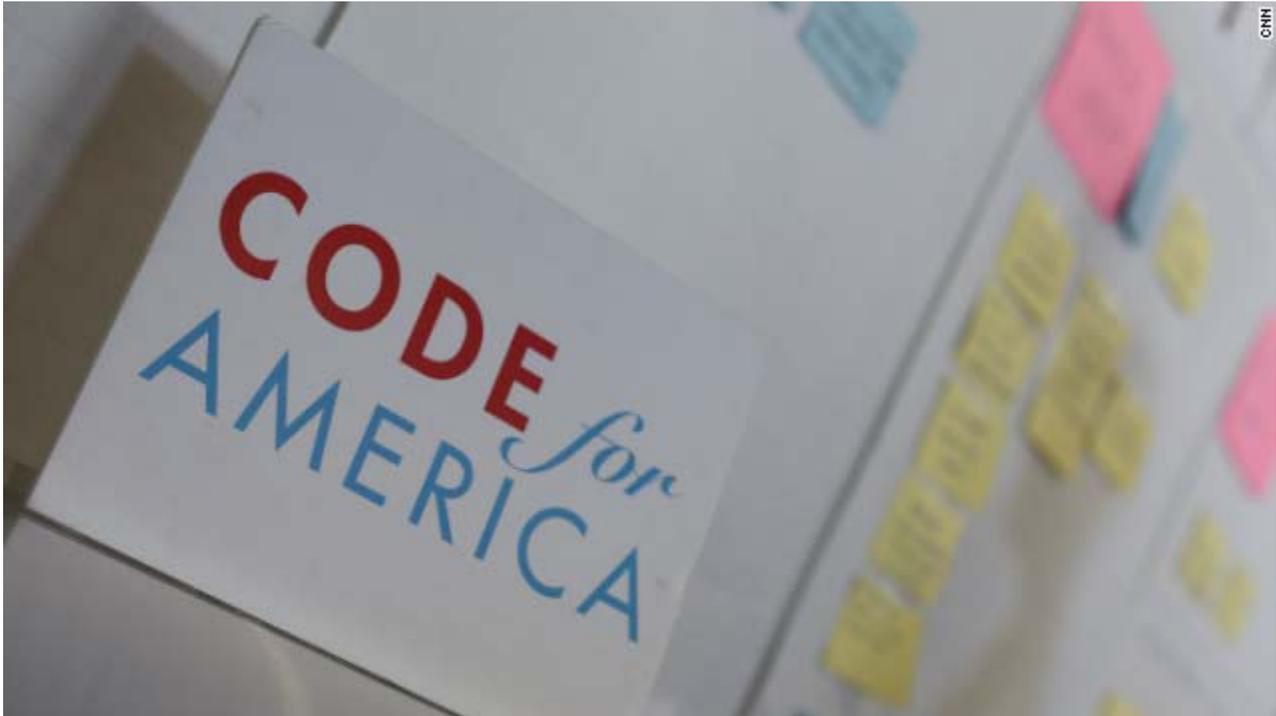


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Cut the bureaucracy – how Boston innovates

Editor's Note: Nigel Jacob is the Co-Chair of the Boston Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics. Jacob was featured in The Next List's 30-min profile on Jennifer Pahlka, Founder of Code for America, and her efforts to help cities cut through bureaucracy and innovate.

By **Nigel Jacob**, Special to CNN

The last several years has seen a wave of innovative tech experiments in governance and governing. These experiments in civic innovation have the potential to profoundly change both the interface between the public and the public sector, and how government delivers service to the public. Paraphrasing Clay Shirky, these innovations represent the experimental wing of modern politics and government.

One of the causes for this wave of experimentation is the effect that the modern web is having on the expectations of the public. The advent of consumerization, cheap computation and mobile tech are changing how people think about city living and the role of the government in it.

These new expectations include:

- the expectation of good/great design
- a sense that people should be able to connect on their own terms: BYOD
- a feeling that people should be able to just solve problems themselves: DIY City
- a greater intolerance for systems that don't work OR that don't get better quickly

This situation presents numerous challenges for government (and indeed any institution) in responding to this change in expectation. Often in the civic innovation community we focus on the kinds of tools and technologies that government uses to deliver service and connect with people. However, a more fundamental problem that limits government's attempts to innovate is the culture of risk aversion.

Finding ways to change this culture is hard. It is our contention that the culture of risk aversion arises out of a lack of a model of managing the risk associated to innovation in local government. City officials are being asked to innovate in an environment that has no model for managing risk and in particular what happens if the innovation projects fails. These officials risk their reputations among their peers, superiors, elected officials, the public, the press, etc. The net result of this is that potentially innovative projects get stalled. From this perspective bureaucracy can be seen as the default means to manage risky projects: slow them down until they go away.

What need a cultural overhaul in government. This can be accomplished via collaborative partnerships with groups or individuals that have effective, lightweight ways of innovating, and thus managing risk.

This is part of the approach we have pursued in Boston. We call our approach “New Urban Mechanics” and we work to aggregate the risk of innovation by being the "Dept of Yes" and creating a safe place in City Hall to experiment and, yes, to fail (on occasion).

The Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics is a civic innovation (co)laboratory that works to develop partnerships that can deliver innovative experiments in civic engagement and new kinds of city services. This work is very much inspired by our Mayor Thomas M. Menino, who was once nicknamed the "Urban Mechanics" because of his singular focus on the details that make cities livable (schools that graduate your kids on time, streets that are smooth, neighborhoods that are safe to walk in after dark).

Code For America (CfA) has been a key ally of ours. They bring a wide range of innovative tech skills and perspective that we have been able to tap to push forward some very interesting products / projects. The talented fellows that CfA supports have the capacity to infect local government with a civic innovation "culture virus".

In our experience, there are lots of innovators in local government. However, up till now most of them have gone unnoticed and un-resourced. By partnering these city officials with a group like CfA, we

can unleash a new generation of innovators both inside and outside of government and reinvent American government.

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