

# The Future of Public Records

**Insights, Prototypes, & Procurement**

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*Erica Pincus, Jackie Chea, Jim Moffet,  
Jon Truong, & Thad Kerosky*

April 2018



Thad

Jim

Erica

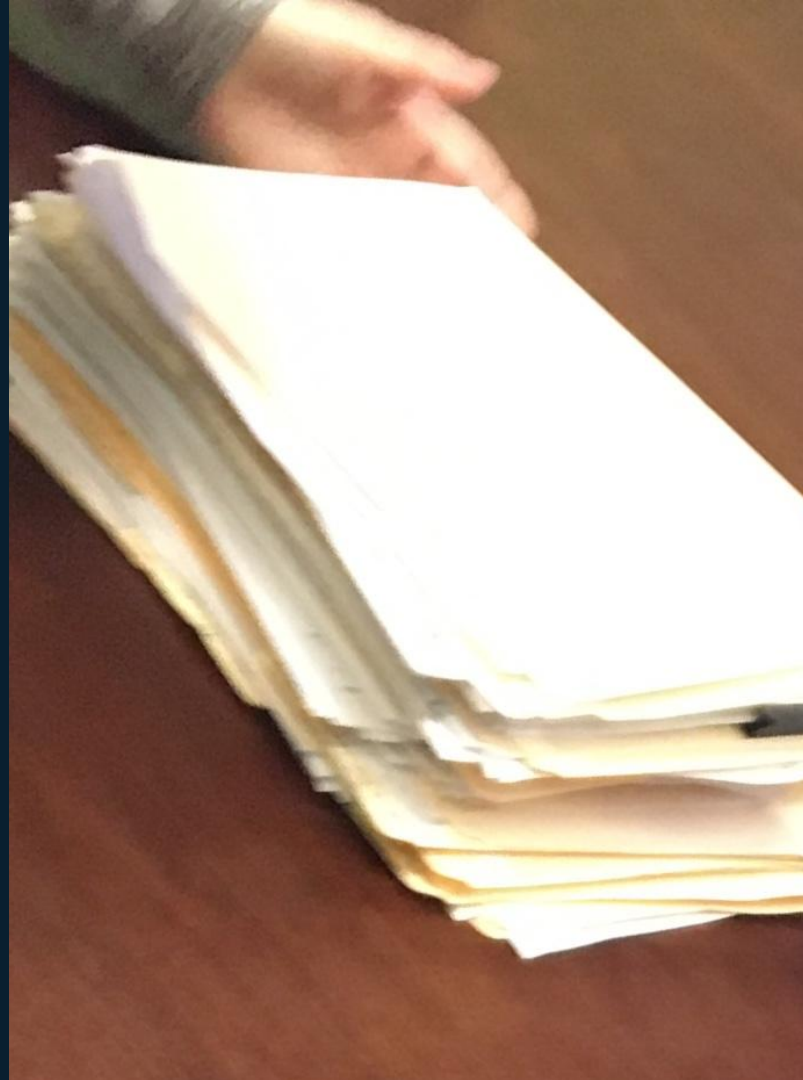
Jon

Jackie

# Our Team

# 1. What are public records?

A **public record** is any document made or received by a government employee.



## 2. Why do public records matter?

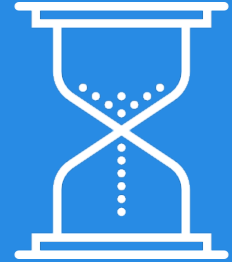
Public records ensure that  
**public data** remains just that  
— **public.**

As people see the  
public good in public  
records,



**laws have gotten stronger,**

**and timelines for  
government response have  
gotten shorter.**









A blue circle with a thick border is centered on the left side of the image. Inside the circle, the word "Requester" is written in white, bold, sans-serif font.

**Requester**



**Requester**

**City Staff**

**Two sides.  
Same coin.**



**Requester**



**City Staff**

**How is the City of  
Boston doing at  
serving public  
records?**

**A little context...**

2016 MA legislature passes  
An Act to Improve Public  
Records

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Records



A New Director of  
Public Records,  
Shawn Williams



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Modernization begins  
with key people and  
processes.



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City decides staff needs  
better tools and looks at  
existing products



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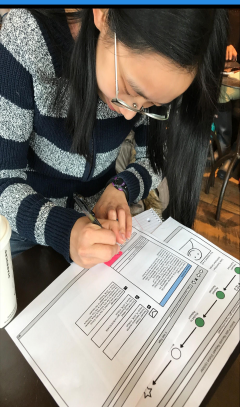
City decides staff needs  
better tools and looks at  
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**User Research**



- 1.** Do we need a records request tracker?
- 2.** What should it do?
- 3.** How do we get a good one?

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- 2.** What should it do?
- 3.** How do we get a good one?



CITY OF BOSTON MAKE REQUESTS ALL REQUESTS DOCUMENTS SIGN IN

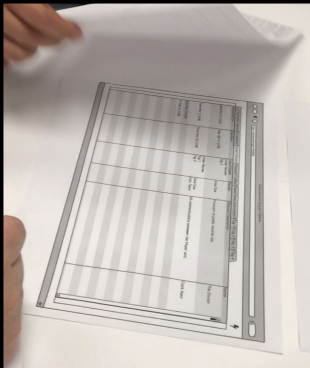
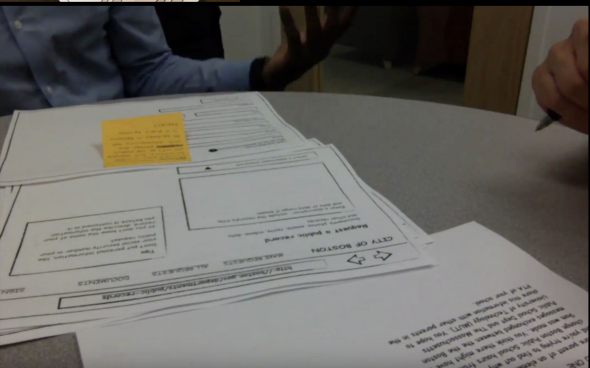
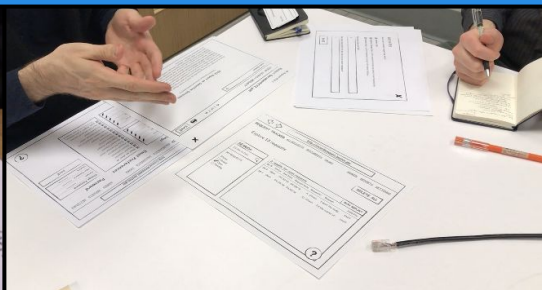
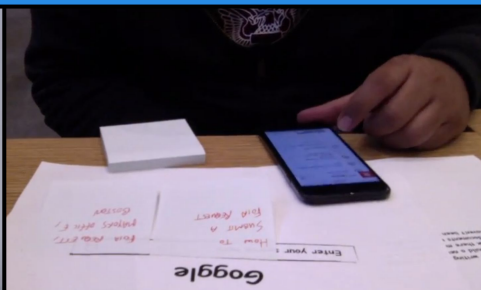
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Documents, photos, emails, texts, videos, data and other records.

Enter a description - include the records title and date or date range if known

**Tips**  
Don't put personal information, like your social security number in your public request.  
If you don't know the name of your record, describe the information you believe is contained in it.

Select a department (required)



Status Updater

Request #123

Request Submitted → Request Received → Routed to Relevant Department → Record Search in Progress → Request Completed

Date Submitted: 04/09/2011  
Estimated Completion Date: 04/24/2011


Your Request

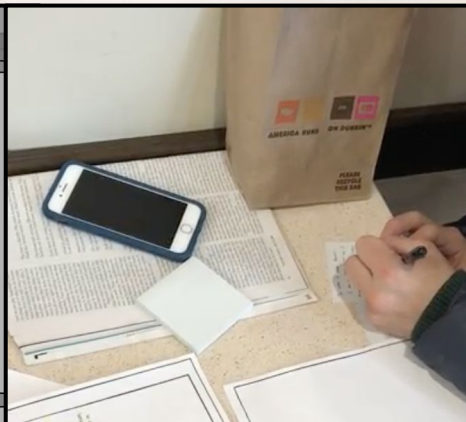
Dear Sham:

I am interested in communication/documents exchanged between Boston Public Schools and the Massachusetts University of Technology in the current year regarding school hours.

Sincerely,  
Michael M.  
987-654-3210

Your request is with:

 Nancy Drew  
Records Access Officer  
Boston Public Schools  
123-456-7890  
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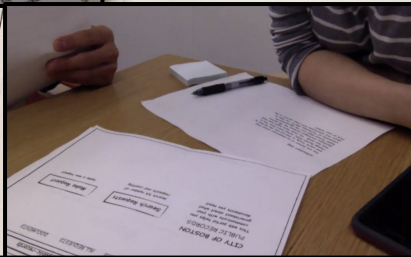
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Record contains information regarding GPS schedule changes in 2015.

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NAME INFORMATION (What are the personal information?)

First Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Last Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
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## SEARCH

"NEED INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL DATASETS, NOT JUST AGGREGATE"

"I FOUND THE WEBSITE A BIT CONFUSING"

"SOMETIMES IT'S NICE TO BE ABLE TO TALK TO A HUMAN BEING"

## REQUEST

"CAN'T READ A REQUESTER'S MIND, BUT ONLY ALLOWED A LIMITED SET OF QUESTIONS"

"GET A LOT OF REQUESTS THAT WE HAVE TO FORWARD, LOTS OF WORK"

"EASIER TO CALL SOMEONE YOU KNOW THAN MAKE A FORMAL REQUEST"

"DECENTRALIZED PROCESS OF OPEN DATA STEWARDSHIP LEADS TO FAVORITISM"

"BULK OF TIME IS SPENT UNDERSTANDING WHAT GOV KEEPS + HOW IT IS STORED"

"IT'S HARD TO STRUCTURE A REQUEST. YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW."

## PROCESSING

"MOST REQUESTS AREN'T EVEN FOR US. THEY TAKE A LOT OF TIME TO ROUTE"

"OFTEN REQUESTS BYPASS THE RAO AND AREN'T TRACKED, QC IS DIFFICULT"

"SOMETIMES I HEAR 3 STAFF-MEMBERS GIVING 3 DIFFERENT ANSWERS TO SAME QUESTION"

"LAGTIME IS A PROBLEM NEED A PORTAL WITH TRACKING CAPABILITY"

"MAYBE I DIDN'T STRUCTURE MY REQUEST CORRECTLY?"

"TIMELINESS IS CRITICAL FOR JOURNALISTS"

## SERVE/DENY

"SOMETIMES NOT ALL INFO CAN BE LEGALLY RELEASED, REQUESTERS CAN BE UPSET"

"IF YOU'RE IN TROUBLE OR YOU'VE JUST BEEN VICTIMIZED, YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE TO TALK TO A MACHINE"

"RELEASE TO ONE  
RELEASE TO ALL"

"RECORDS SHOULD BE PROVIDED IN AN OPEN FORMAT"

"PUBLIC RECORDS GIVES YOU A COMPLETE SET OF DOCUMENTS, RATHER THAN SELECTIVE LEAKING"

## APPEAL

"APPEALS IS A FORMAL PROCESS AND IS THE MAIN CAUSE OF LONG DELAYS"

"THE BASIC PREMISE IS THAT THEY DON'T WANT TO GIVE YOU DOCUMENTS"

# PAIN POINTS

## SEARCH

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# PAIN POINTS



**Yes, we need a tracker!**

- 1.** Do we need a records request tracker?
- 2.** What should it do?
- 3.** How do we get a good one?

It should solve  
people's most  
important issues:

**specificity, routing, &  
communication.**

## **Specificity**

What you actually want

## **Routing**

Who's got the goods?

## **Communication**

Status please?

# Specificity | What you actually want

## Requester

*"It's hard to structure a request. It's like a black box in there. You don't know what you don't know."*

## City Staff

*"Poorly-structured requests where the requester wants to start fishing for information that are extremely time-consuming."*



- + Helped requesters get specific about what they need.
- + Keywords trigger tooltips to guide the requester

## Request a public record

Documents, photos, emails, texts, videos, data and other records.

Enter a description - include the record's title and date or date range if known

Requesting Messages  
& documents from  
Mayors office  
regarding  
Amazon project

### Tips

Don't put personal information, like your social security number in your public request.

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Before

## Request a public record


Documents, photos, emails, texts, videos, data and other records.

Enter  
and da

Requesting Messages +  
documents from  
Mayor Walsh Regarding  
Amazon Bid. between  
Jan. 2017 - ~~2018~~  
@ Public records@ <sup>Mar 2018</sup> ~~Boston~~

title

Selec

Keywords:  
Amazon, Bid,   
tax incentive, \*



### Tips

SPECIFY THE EMAIL  
ADDRESS OF THE  
RECIPIENT OR  
SENDER TO GET  
MORE PRECISE RESULTS

TRY  
ADDING A DATE  
RANGE LIKE  
"BETWEEN JANUARY 1, 2015  
AND SEPTEMBER 1, 2016"

~~Be~~

specify keywords  
that you would  
like searched

With

tippy



# Routing | Who's got the goods?

## Requester

“There are still different agencies and the question is *how do people know who has what?*”

## City Staff

“I wish the requests would stop coming to me and *go directly to the correct person.*”



Recommends the right  
department to send requests  
to based on keywords

Select a Department (required)

|

Select a Department (required)

Analytics Team

Animal Care And Control

Archaeology

Archives And Records Management

Arts And Culture

Assessing

Auditing

Bos:311

Boston Bikes

Boston Centers For Youth & Families

Broadband And Cable

Budget

City Clerk

City Council

City Hall To Go

Consumer Affairs And Licensing

Digital Team

Disabilities Commission

Diversity

Economic Development

Education Cabinet

Elderly Commission

Election

Emergency Management

Emergency Medical Services

Environment

Fair Housing And Equity

Fire Operations

Fire Prevention

Food Access

Housing Authority

Human Resources

Immigrant Advancement

Innovation And Technology

Inspectional Services

Intergovernmental Relations

Labor Relations

Landmarks Commission

Law

Library

Licensing Board

Mayor's Office

Neighborhood Development

Neighborhood Services

New Urban Mechanics

Parking Clerk

Parks And Recreation

Planning & Development Agency

Police

Press Office

Procurement

Property Management

Public Facilities

Public Health Commission

Public Safety

Public Works

Recovery Services 311

Registry: Birth, Death, And Marriage

Resilience And Racial Equity

Retirement

Returning Citizens

Schools

Small Business Development

Tax Collection

Tourism, Sports, And Entertainment

Transportation

Treasury

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# HELP TEACH THE NEW BOS:311

Please make up 3 situations that could be solved by reporting:

## Crosswalk or street marker inspection

Request to inspect a crosswalk or other street marker.

[I don't understand this service](#)

① WHAT CAN WE HELP WITH?

- ▶ Describe each scenario as if you were typing an answer to the question “what can we help with?”
- ▶ Use different words for each description. For example, if you say “crack in the road” for one, use “hole in the street” for another.
- ▶ Don't worry too much about grammar or spelling. Be natural!
- ▶ If you can't come up with 3 different ones, that's okay! Write as much as you can, and then click submit.

② WHAT CAN WE HELP WITH?

③ WHAT CAN WE HELP WITH?

**311**  
**Machine**  
**Learning**

# Communication | Status, please?

## City Staff

“We don’t have these records and we need to find out which staff have these records and then help them stay on track”

## Requester

“Maybe this is crazy, but it would be really cool to have a Domino’s pizza tracker for your request.”





Shows the progress of  
your request with a  
human touch

## Request #123

Status: Record Search in Progress

Dear Nancy:

I am requesting messages and documents from Mayor Walsh regarding the Amazon bid, sent between January 2017 and March 2018.

Sincerely,

Jane Doe  
987-654-3210

Received: April 9, 2018 via email

Due: April 24, 2018

Departments: Department of Public Records

Point of Contact: Nancy Drew



Document(s) Added  
<http://www2.boston.gov/w/BOS123456>  
April 11, 2018, 9:02am



External Message  
This record was provided to the Public Ethics Commission by the City Attorney's office, however the custodian of the record is the Boston Public Schools Records Access Officer. They have added to the request.  
April 10, 2018, 2:05pm

## Request #123



Request Submitted



Request Received



Routed to Relevant Department



Record Search In Progress

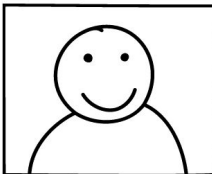


Request Completed

Date Submitted: 04/09/201

Estimated Completion Date: 04/24/201

Your request is with:



Nancy Drew  
Records Access Officer  
Department of Public Records  
123-456-7890  
ndrew@boston.gov

Your Request

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## Specificity

What you actually want



## Routing

Who's got the goods?



## Communication

Status please?



**We can also increase  
the efficiency of the  
system as a whole.**

## Publishing past requests can deliver a **quadruple bottom line**

- City staff love it
- Requesters love it
- Taxpayers love it
- Boosts the City's transparency creds



## Explore **7942** requests and counting.

If you need City of San Diego records that may have been previously released, please search past requests. You may find what you need!

### SEARCH:



### STATUS

- Closed
- Open

### REQUEST DATE

### POINT OF CONTACT



### DEPARTMENT

### 7942 results

Id #	Status	Request Date	Request
18-1406	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	04/16/18	A copy of agency arrest report 88007467 dated 4/12/1988.
18-1402	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	04/16/18	Per our phone conversation today, I am requesting a copy of the Civil Penalty Order processed Apr...
18-1397	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	04/14/18	I would like a copy of Incident Reports 15050006549, 150006021 and any other related incident/pol...
18-1396	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	04/14/18	I would like a copy of SDPD Incident/Police Report 13070007223. The report is written by SDPD Off...
18-1390	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	04/13/18	We recently requested C of O's for 5550 Carmel Mountain Road AKA Carmel County Road. We received...
18-1379	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	04/12/18	Ignore the previous request. The staff put on the wrong page. The request is for City of San Fran...
18-1378	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	04/12/18	We would like to have a payment record and unpaid invoices (if any) from San Francisco Public Wor...

- 1.** Do we need a records request tracker?
- 2.** What should it do?
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[HOME](#) › [DEPARTMENTS](#) › [PROCUREMENT](#)

# PROCUREMENT

*We buy the best quality products for the City at the lowest possible price. Our department selects vendors through public bidding and processes purchase orders and contracts.*

[LEARN ABOUT BIDDING](#)   [MORE RESOURCES](#)   [MEET THE PURCHASING AGENT](#)

CITY OF BOSTON BIDS AND RFPS



## CONTACT



617-635-4564



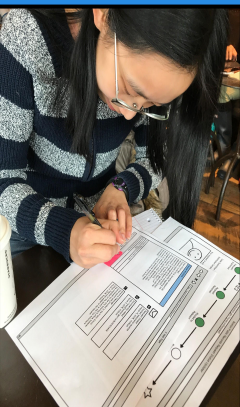
[PURCHASING@BOSTON.GOV](mailto:PURCHASING@BOSTON.GOV)



1 CITY HALL SQUARE  
ROOM 808  
BOSTON, MA 02201-2034  
UNITED STATES



Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. - 5 p.m.



CITY OF BOSTON MAKE REQUESTS ALL REQUESTS DOCUMENTS SIGN IN

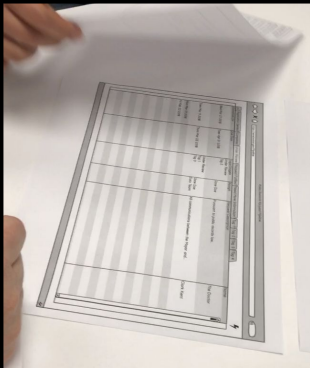
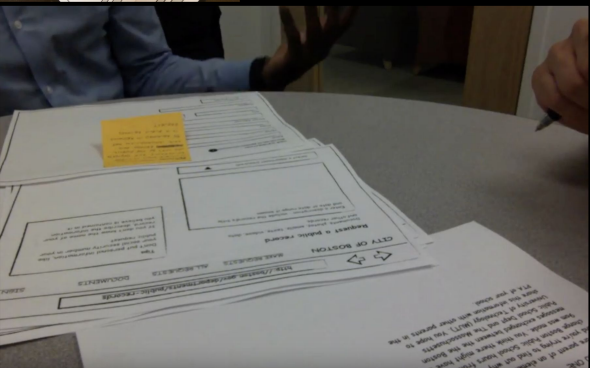
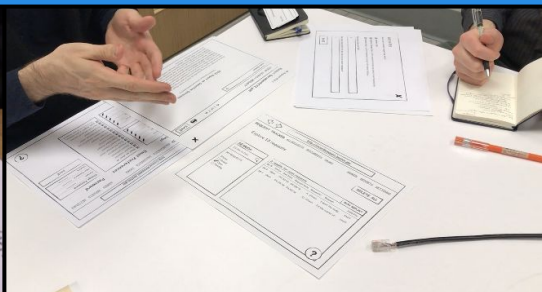
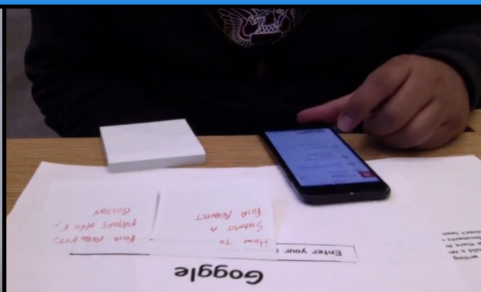
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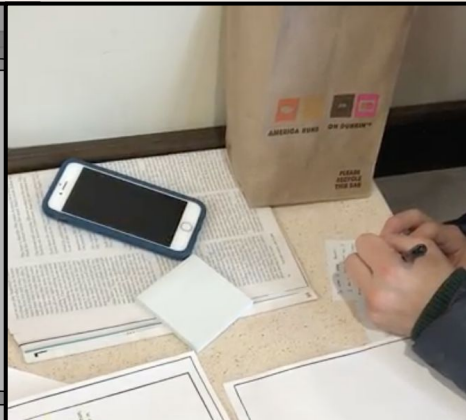
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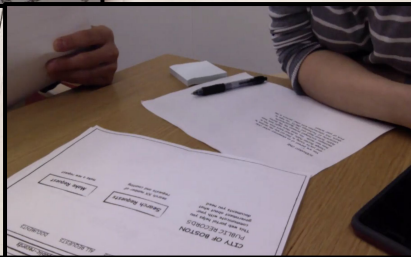
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Select a department (required)

NAME INFORMATION (What are the personal information?)  
First Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Last Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone: \_\_\_\_\_  
Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

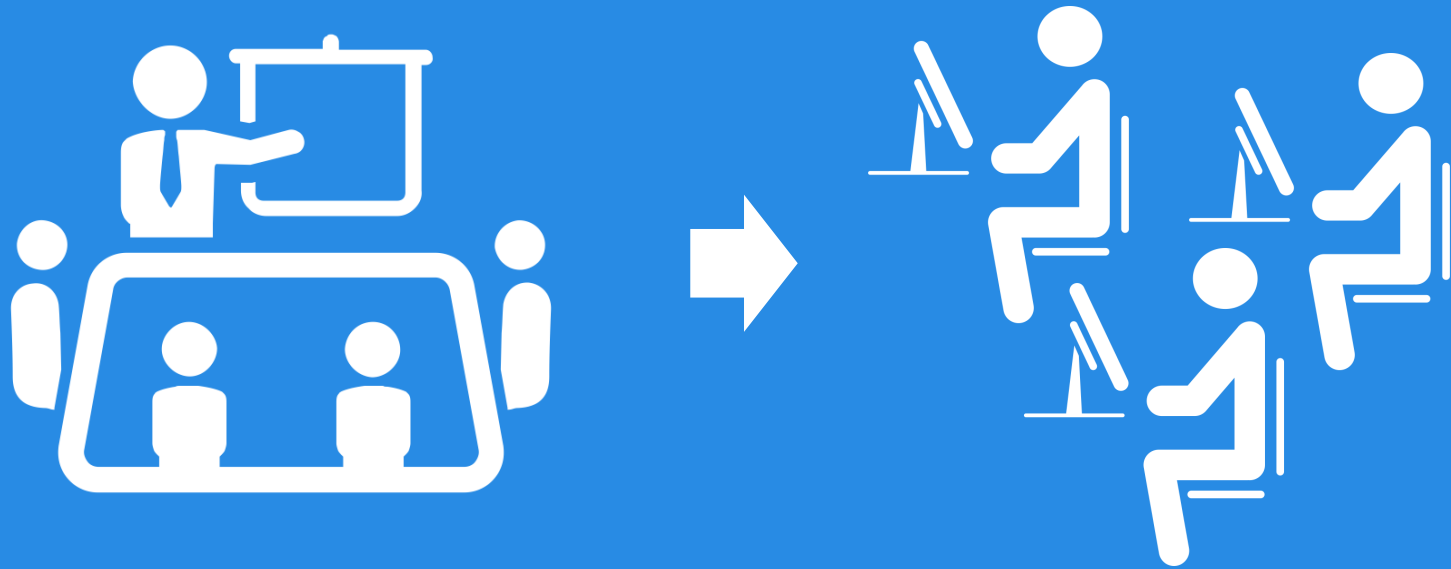


**Let's help vendors  
deliver on user  
insights.**

# Redesigning vendor demos can incentivize a focus on users



# Redesigning vendor demos can incentivize a focus on users



**So what?**

+ A tracker is a huge win for  
“both sides of the coin”

# So what?

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- + A tracker is a huge win for “both sides of the coin”
- + A best-in-class tracker is outstanding and within reach

# So what?

- + A tracker is a huge win for “both sides of the coin”
- + A best-in-class tracker is outstanding and within reach
- + User testing & procurement innovation allow us to move from a “win” to a best-in-class solution

**Thank You!**



# Questions?



# Appendix

# “Best-in-class” Solution



Integrates best practices from currently-available commercial options



Addresses additional user pain points re: specificity, routing, & communication



seamless docs

open  
RECORDS

ZY  
LAB



NextRequest



logikcull.com



exterro

GovQA

June 6, 2014

Beyond Magic Markers

## Online FOIL Processing Reduces FOIL Costs By 66%

We estimate that an online Open FOIL system like Oakland's<sup>16</sup> or the federal government's will save New York City roughly \$13 million per year.

Online FOIL processing systems reduce the costs of processing FOIL requests in two ways. First, they reduce the time it takes agency personnel to track and respond to each request. Second, they reduce the number of requests agencies receive. Online systems reduce requests by helping agencies easily identify and upload frequently requested information to online “reading rooms” or open data portals where it’s easy for the public to find.

### Reductions in Cost Per FOIL

The New York State Department of Health’s newest version of its Smart FOIL Processing System reduced their average FOIL response time from up to 60 days to less than 20 days and reduced their backlog by 90%.<sup>17</sup> Less time spent processing FOIL requests means less money spent processing the same number of FOIL requests.

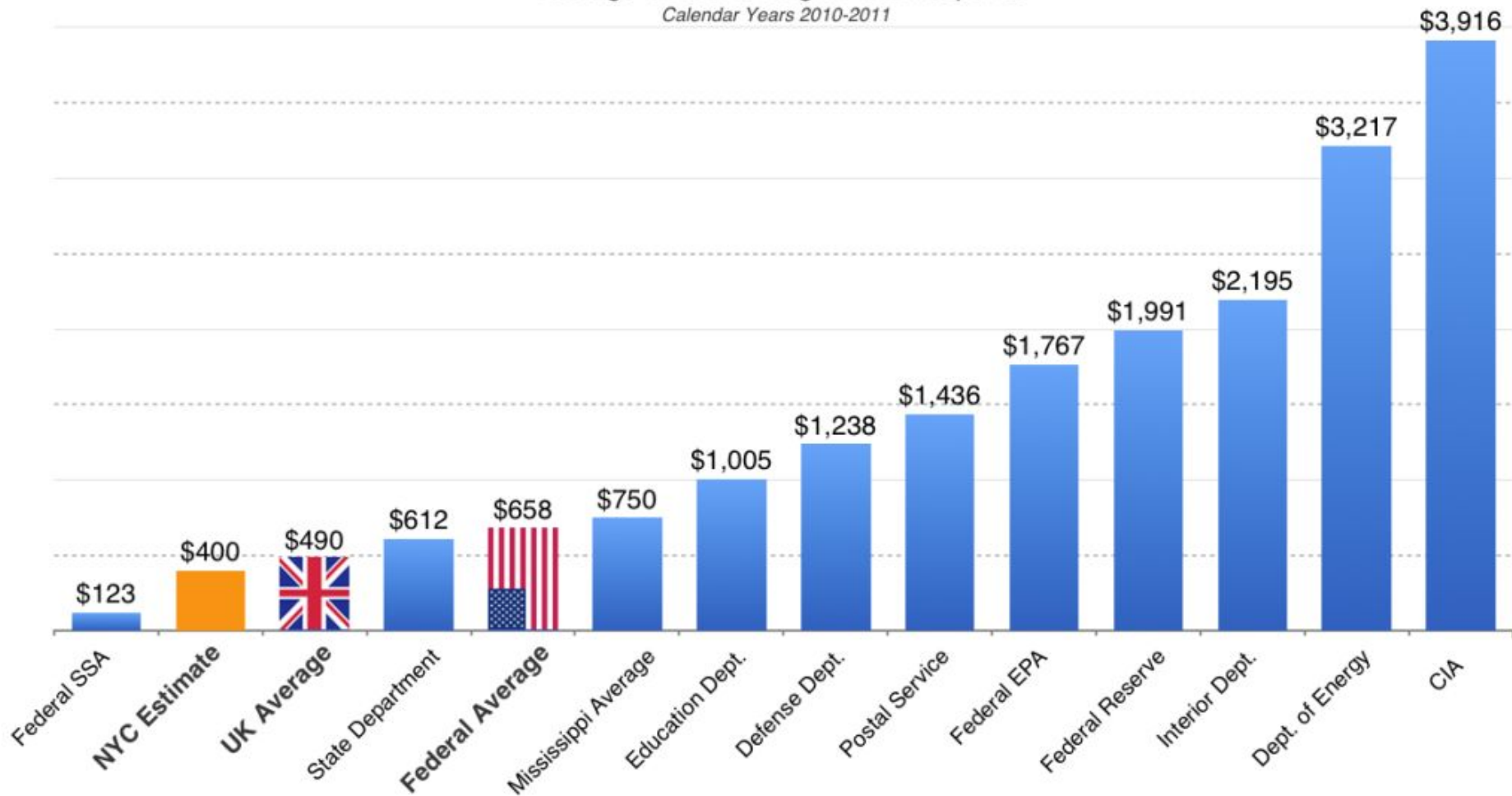
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“New York City agencies... use a hodgepodge of paper based methods that are expensive, slow and unreliable.”

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# Average Cost of a Single FOIL Response

Calendar Years 2010-2011



# Procurement Recommendations Beyond “the Four Corners of the RFP”



01

## Innovative Vendor Demo Process

After traditional demo, bring in 2-3 internal users and ask the vendor to train them and then leave. Then have someone submit a request, and **observe the staffers using the system unassisted to assess adoption and ease of use.**

02

## Agile Contract Terms & Renewals

Ideally there would be a **modular roll-out** with the next phase **contingent on hitting success metrics** related to the needs of both internal and external users. Renewal should be based on improvements against these metrics.

03

## Measure User Outcomes

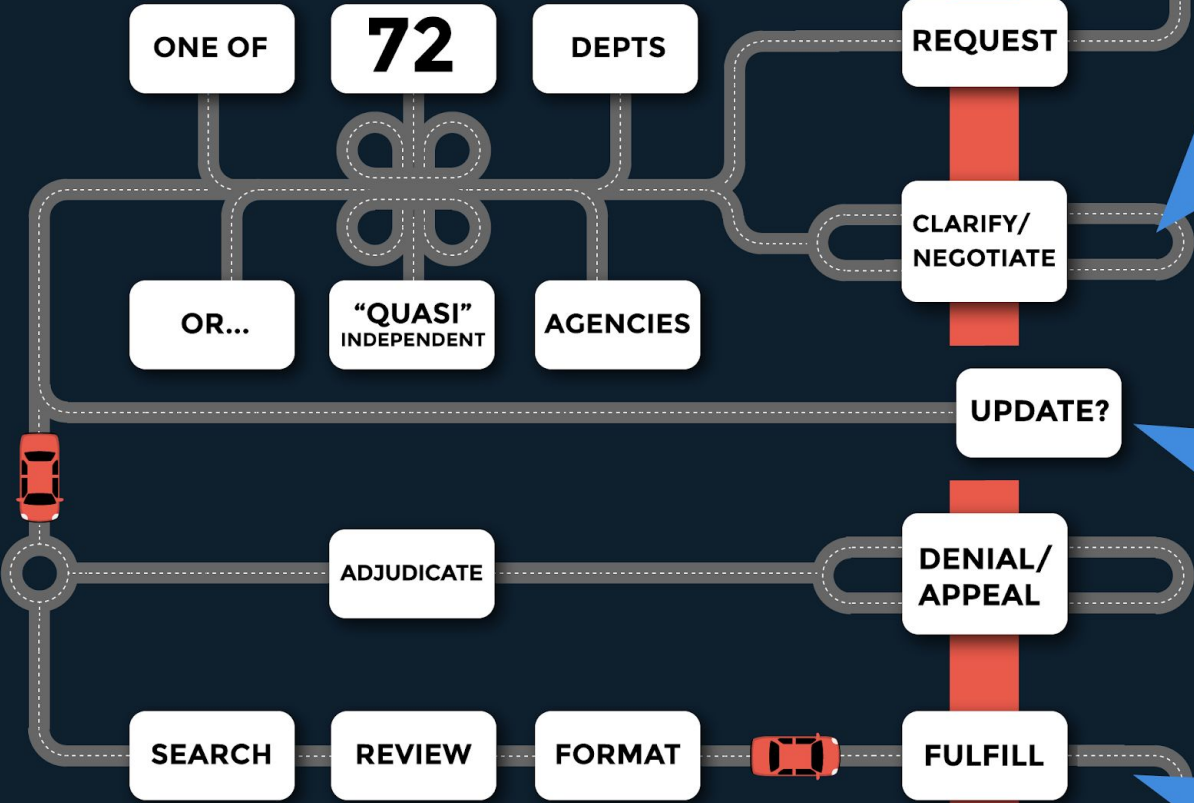
Contract would include metrics of success that **incentivize continued user research and testing by the vendors** with both internal and external users of the system.

# OUR DESIGN PRINCIPLES

- Give people clear reasons to trust the process
- Give people a clear understanding of how the process works and which stage they're at
- Map the unknown and make the map legible
- Recognize that negative experiences stick and positive experiences need a boost
- Capture what's working now and give people credit for it



# INTERNAL ROUTING OF PUBLIC RECORDS



“There’s a disconnect between what agencies are looking at and what we know to ask that drags out requests”

-Isaac, Data Scientist

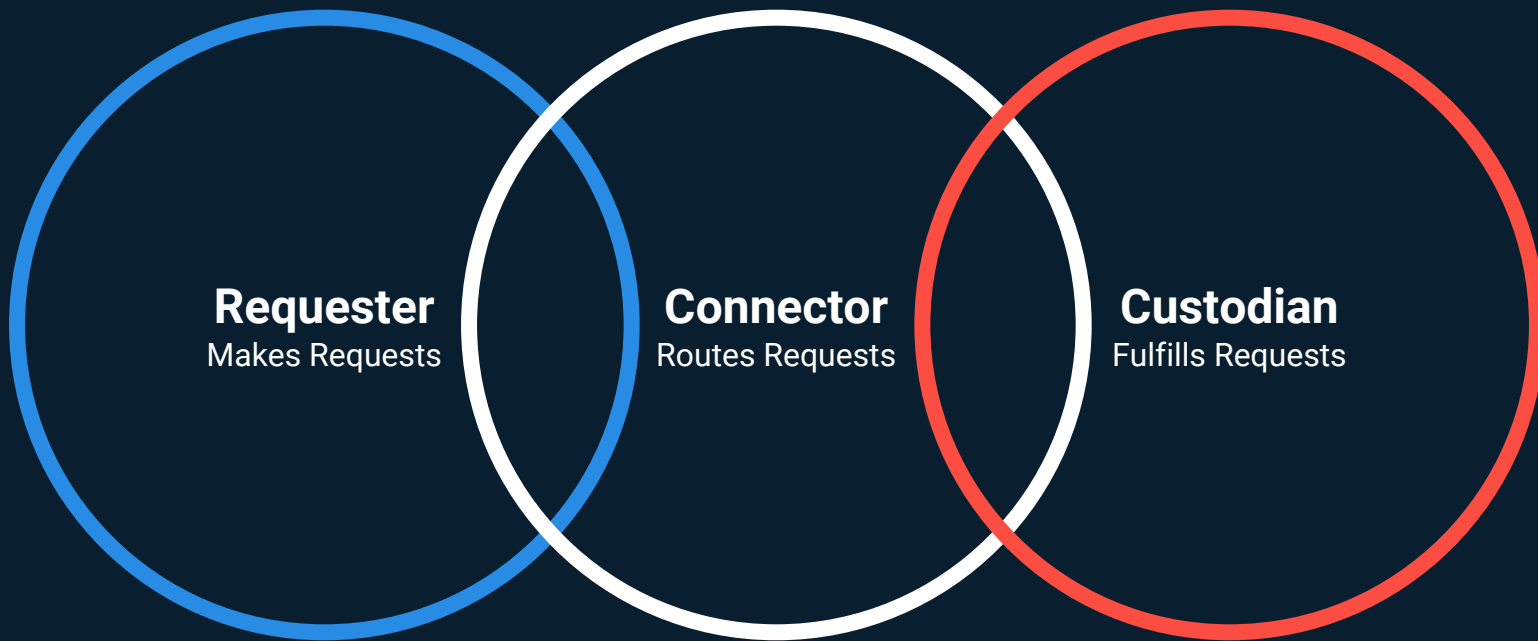
“If I could wave a magic wand, I’d be able to track a request, see where it is in the queue, same as a package”

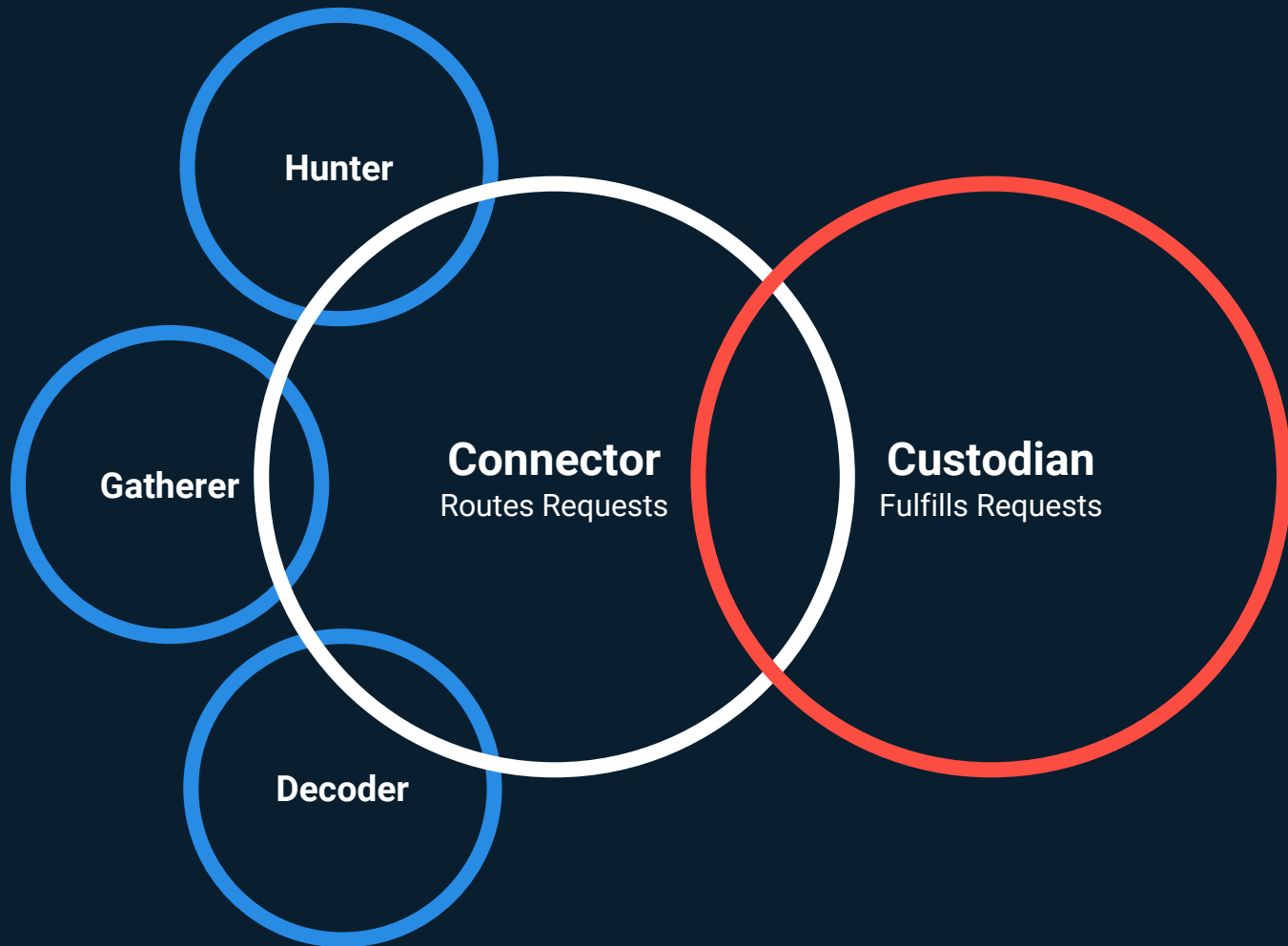
-Felisha, Harvard Fellow

“Once I found the right contact email I was able to get my request fulfilled in less than two hours!”

-William, Journalist









# Hunters

*I am precise and clear in my request for a specific record that I know should exist.*

“I just need a copy of my marriage license!”

## Behaviors

- Asks for a very specific document
- Knows exact nature of the information they need
- Does not require a particular file format or structure to the record

**Examples:** Vendors, Legal firms, Individuals

Frequency of Contact with City



Structure of Request



Specificity of Request



External



Internal



# Gatherers

*I cast a wide net by making requests on a broad range of records. I'm not always sure what I'll find, but I know that if I ask for something in the right place at the right time, I'll be able to net something useful and insightful.*

"It's hard to structure a request. You don't know what you don't know. It's like a black box in there."

## Behaviors

- Asks multiple departments/individuals for records
- Sets broad parameters for data to allow for maximal coverage

**Examples:** Investigative Journalists, Advocates

Frequency of Contact with City



Structure of Request



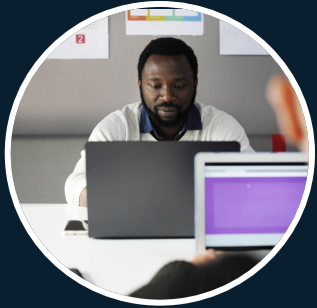
Specificity of Request



External



Internal



# Decoders

*I know precisely what I need and how I need it to be structured. I'm driven to analyze patterns using technical methods, often as an advocate for others.*

“There’s a disconnect between what we’re asking for and what agencies are looking at. We’re requesting from a black box.”

## Behaviors

- Wants data in a specific structured format
- Wants either disaggregated or personalized information
- Analyzes data sets to identify trends

**Examples:** Researchers, Open Data Users

Frequency of Contact with City



Structure of Request



Specificity of Request



External



Internal



# Custodians

*I respond to public records requests that I receive through connectors or directly from the public. It's not my primary role, but one that comes up on occasion.*

“When requests come in, they're disruptive. Deadlines imposed by law mean we have to focus on them immediately!”

## Behaviors

- Holds and manages data as part of primary duties
- Searches for, packages, and arranges records
- May work on records that are highly or loosely structured

**Examples:** Clerk's Office, Boston City Archives

Volume of Requests



Responding to Requests is  
Primary Role



External

Internal





# Connectors

*I guide requests through the system and support requesters throughout the process. I work to make the system work better for requesters and custodians.*

“Government agencies get tired of releasing 10,000 pages to a reporter and having them use one sentence.”

## Behaviors

- Routes and tracks others' public records requests
- Advises on or modify requests to balance compliance with the law and requester needs
- Advocates internally and externally to improve overall health of the system

**Examples:** Director of Public Records, Muckrock, RAOs

Volume of Requests



Responding to Requests is  
Primary Role



External



Internal