Lab @ OPM Fellowship
The Lab @ OPM

The Lab is a innovation center at the Office of Personnel Management, the Federal agency that manages the government's workforce. The Lab was created in 2011 to find ways to increase the amount of creativity and innovation by federal employees to in turn improve the quality of services provided to the United States and its people.

In this mission, the Lab leverages and teaches the Human Centered Design methodology as a way of approaching the complex challenges that exist within government. They aim to do this in a number of ways - through actual project work, coaching teams through their own design process, as well as teaching employees across agencies so that they can apply these methodologies at their own organizations.
Expectations

The application of design methodologies in Federal government is something that had excited me for a long time — all the way from in high school after coming across a lecture from then Presidential Innovation Fellow Sarah Brooks. The scale of the projects and the potential for meaningful impact is inspiring.

To me, the Lab’s structure, in which it collaborated with teams across multiple agencies was an exciting way to get a look into the various challenges that currently exist in the Federal Government as well as the efforts being introduced to solving them. I was also eager to learn from the designers at the Lab - to understand their experiences in designing in public sector.
Design Guides

One of the main and longest running projects at the lab is the design guide series. The series consists of two types of books - a concept guide (which teaches the basics of various phases of the design process) and a making guide (which, steps the reader through various design activities). The guide series is a partnership with the Veteran's Experience Office.

One of my roles was the layout of the Design Phase concept guide in Indesign - this 80 page book was created by the lab to give background on the what when and why of various design methods to inform the design activities in the making guide.
My favorite part of the fellowship was observing and helping coach teams from various federal agencies work through their challenges. This gave me a clear view of many problem spaces that currently exist in government as well as the ways in which design could either solve or help to facilitate a solution.
Small Projects

RAIO Interviews
I worked on interviews for evaluation of a program run with the Refugee Asylum and International Operations directive. These interviews helped understand the pain points that employees had in applying the design methods that they had learned to their everyday work.

Business Development
One of the activities at the Lab I enjoyed the most was sitting in on introductory meetings with potential clients of the lab. These were often members of various agencies who were facing a particular challenge where they believed the application of design or teaching design methods to their employees could make a difference. Watching the Lab members structure these conversations and tailor their offerings to each unique client was incredibly informative.

Hiring for Design in Government
While the Lab works with a number of clients, these are normally project based introductions to design. Ultimately, the goal would be to have design integrated within the agencies themselves where they can have a sustained presence. Myself and the other summer fellow assisted with organizing a hiring effort led by the lab - both creating interest among designers to work in government as well as advocating for the creation of design oriented positions in government.
Takeaways

Accessibility
All products released by a government agency must meet accessibility standards — normally made easy by the existence of various templates/guidelines. I took it upon myself to make sure to not only follow these guidelines but also to break down and understand as much as I could about accessibility so that I could apply them to more out-of-the-box projects without set formats.

Introducing Design
Watching the various ways that the lab introduced design concepts and practices to personnel that came into workshops and projects gave me the opportunity to reflect on the ways to present design to partners with minimal prior exposure. Before the design process can begin, it is important to have stakeholder buy in and the fellowship gave me experience in how to translate design impact to those unfamiliar or skeptical about the process.

Problem Spaces
As an interaction designer, most of the challenges that I was interested in at the start were citizen facing products and services. As I became familiar with the challenges articulated by federal employees at workshops and courses held by the lab, I began to see how many opportunities existed in leveraging design techniques as a way of tackling many of the internal issues and broken workflows that exist within organizations as large and complex as the federal government.
Reflection

Being at the lab was an interesting learning experience as it both gave me a look into the complex challenges faced by the various agencies that could definitely be aided by the use of design methodologies but also the number of roadblocks that exist in this effort.

Going in, I was mainly interested in the design of citizen facing services but the more exposure I had to different agencies, I realised that there was a lot to be done on the internal end to streamline the processes and tools used by federal employees that would in turn allow them to better serve their constituents. There is a lot of work to be done and I am optimistic for the greater inclusion of designers and the Human Centered Design Methodology in this effort.

Apart from the lab, the DC environment was inspiring in itself. I had the opportunity to attend many evening events and lectures - both design and non-design related and the amount of conversation regarding the future of government and civic tech has given me a lot to think about as I consider a career in this space.
Thank You!

As always, I am thankful to Designmatters for their continuous support and exposure to meaningful problem spaces that has been consistently inspiring part of my educational career. I am grateful to Susannah, Jennifer, and Garett for all they have done to support me as well as the rest of ArtCenter in having access to these projects.

Thank you to the members of the Lab for being warm and welcoming throughout my time in DC and for answering my unending stream of questions as I attempted to get a hang of this space. The goal that each member of the Lab strives towards everyday is deeply inspiring.

Thank you to Maria for being a consistent source of support and cheerleader throughout the process. She found a way to make everything into something exciting or a learning experience. I was in constant awe of the depth of knowledge and number of examples she had on every topic I brought up. Conversations with her were one of the most valuable parts of the summer.

Thank you to Bob, my co-fellow this summer for solid company and equally solid podcast recommendations.