Open Government Partnership

ISRAEL

FINDING CREATIVE USE FOR PUBLIC DATA

For a service that is offered for over one million stops in 800 cities, Sonny Ben-Shimon, software engineer at Google Israel, thought it odd that Google Transit was still not available in his country. The thought quickly materialized into a challenge. Sonny's friend who works at a private transportation company advised him to contact the government's Chief Information Officer (CIO) to acquire the transportation data and start the service. What followed was a remarkable example of collaboration with the government, where they extracted data from the government's portal Data.gov.il to set up Google Transit in Israel.

FEATURES OF THE INITIATIVE

Data.gov.il is a single window portal that aims to give access to public records data produced from information held by the government. Being a metadata site, it holds around 250 datasets that are published in the websites of different ministries. The idea is to encourage creative use of the data by civil society and the larger public by providing tools for information presentation, standardized downloading and standard API's.

FACING CHALLENGES

Surged by the membership to OGP, Minister Michael Eitan, then Head of the Ministerial Committee to improve government services to the public, launched on the challenging task to

convince ministries to release datasets. "The government in its traditional way of thinking is very secretive", says Yereal Oshrat, Head of Data.gov.il, which has been set up by the e-Government unit based in the Ministry of Finance. He recalls how Minister Eitan made hundreds of phone calls and held meetings with each ministry to secure the datasets. In the best-case scenarios they have received data in XML formats from some ministries while others have been in Excel formats.

Just as setting up Data.gov.il was a challenging process for the e-Gov unit, Google Israel's experience setting up transit data on their maps was equally tortuous. At first, they directly approached the private railway and bus companies to provide them with data on departure times, location of stations and routes, to name a few. But

cooperation from these companies was not forthcoming. Since Google Transit would collate all the data and decide the best route for commuters, the companies felt that this would increase competition.

MAXIMIZING OPPORTUNITIES

Although the service providers are private, the government is responsible for partitioning the country into zones and inviting bids for private companies to provide transport services for each zone. As a result, the government holds some of this data provided to them by the private companies themselves. Sonny and his team approached the CIO, and given that Data.gov.il was already operational by then, began the work of aggregating the data. The government also contacted the Ministry of Transportation and the Israel Railways to furnish them with additional data.

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- Sonny Ben-Shimon,
Software Engineer at Google Israel

In the process of collation Google Israel identified many inaccuracies with the datasets. For example, while visualizing the route between two locations in a city they found the route passing over the sea. Google Israel ran its validation tools over the government database, checking for similar inconsistencies and making recommendations to address them. "We found the e-Gov team very open to the process of validation and improvement. It took 6-10 months of iteration with the government until we were able to create the transit map for 25,000 bus stations and 53 train stations across the country", says Sonny.

EARLY RESULTS

In April this year, Google launched the service covering routes by bus, train and the light rail to reach destinations. It is available in English, Hebrew and Arabic and uses information from 21 service providers. It is not the first service that provides information on public

transportation. There are other mobile services and applications that have crowded the market before. However, the Transit app offers additional features such as complementary navigation services and alerts that display when the user needs to leave home or office to attend a meeting for example. That both the technological platforms Data.gov.il and Google Transit are open source, and therefore publicly available for anyone to download and improve upon is very important to promoting creativity and innovation. These are the principles upon which OGP thrives and to which Israel has committed.

It also helped that the e-Gov team is small and consists of five people who were highly conversant with modern technology to be able to set up Data.gov.il fairly quickly and without extra resources. But lastly and most importantly, it is the team's relentless daily work in persuading ministries to comply with the Freedom of Information law and recognize the

benefits of promoting the information economy that really fuels the potential of Data.gov.il .

SCREEN SHOT OF DATA.GOV.IL ENGLISH WEBSITE