The Small Business Administration Goes Digital

How Enquizit Helped Streamline Certification in the AWS Cloud

By Arun Sundarum

The U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) is a government agency that helps entrepreneurs and small business owners find funding to help them start and grow their companies. The SBA fulfills a critical mission—but they had a problem. Over a period of many years, the SBA had developed a complex application process that heavily relied on paperwork. Small business owners who applied to the SBA faced a long and cumbersome process that included multiple entry points to register and lots of paper forms and printing. When the federal government released a memorandum that called for agencies to streamline their services for customers using innovative technologies, the SBA created a strategic plan to optimize their IT infrastructure and streamline the application process—permanently.

Unsure of how to get started, the SBA asked the United States Digital Services (USDS) to help perform a "discovery sprint," which would reveal problems and provide specific recommendations on how to modernize. As a result, the USDS suggested partnering with a contractor who could lead them through the complex process of modernization using digital transformation. Enquizit, with their agile approach and record of excellence and efficiency, was the perfect choice.

Challenges: Modernizing a Paper-Based Program

Over the years, the SBA had tried four separate times to modernize its systems, but due to the project's sheer complexity, each attempt failed to produce a cohesive design. For example, although the SBA had built a digital system to handle aspects of the registration process, online applicants still had to mail in forms after they reached a certain point in the online process.

The agency faced many barriers to modernization, including:

» Dispersed locations. With 68 district offices all soliciting their own application forms throughout the U.S. and U.S. territories, data collection and sharing was a challenge.

» No single source of truth. After attempting to modernize its system, the SBA ended up with two different systems that still did not address many of its core issues. The SBA struggled to keep the systems in sync, a challenge made harder by the fact that regulations change frequently.

» Multiple user groups. Numerous user groups needed to interact with the system in different ways and at varying clearance levels. Beyond registrants and SBA staff, congressional staffers also needed to access constituent data, and government contracting offices needed an up-to-date database of qualified applicants.

Despite their earlier attempts, the SBA lacked end-to-end digitalization of the application and compliance processes required to administer their valuable programs.

Building an End-to-End Digital Solution

Enquizit's goal was to help the SBA deploy a modern, cloud-based program application and case management solution that would enable small business owners to apply for programs in a fully digital environment for the first time in SBA history. To ensure that the solution would truly meet the needs of the end-users, Enquizit leveraged its deep expertise in human centered design to gather early and frequent feedback. The idea was to create a single point of entry for small businesses by offering a well-designed, functional web application that would streamline the certification process and allow as many firms as possible to apply and gain eligibility.

Enquizit's end-to-end solution included:

» **An agile approach to development.**
To overcome the roadblocks that the SBA experienced in the past, Enquizit used an agile approach to create their cloud-native, open-source solution. By moving incrementally, getting feedback, and scaling as they went, Enquizit was able to help the SBA learn on the go, slowly adding SBA programs into one cohesive system. The Enquizit team leveraged an agile methodology successfully during each phase

of the software development lifecycle, from requirements gathering and story generation through development and deployment to an AWS-based production environment.

» **Helping the SBA pass security requirements**
As a government entity, security is always a top concern. In order to use the software in a production environment, the agency first needed the system to pass Authority to Operate (ATO), a process that involves identifying the data and risk level if the system is attacked or breached. Enquizit helped the agency through ATO, teaching their team how to shift to a DevSecOps methodology to continuously monitor the system under Federal Information System Management Act (FISMA) guidelines.

» **Training and support all along the way**
A system is only successful if it can be maintained, over time. In addition to helping the SBA build a cloud solution, Enquizit also offered the agency extra support to keep everything running effectively and smoothly. Enquizit provided extensive training at each location and, for the first years, helped fill
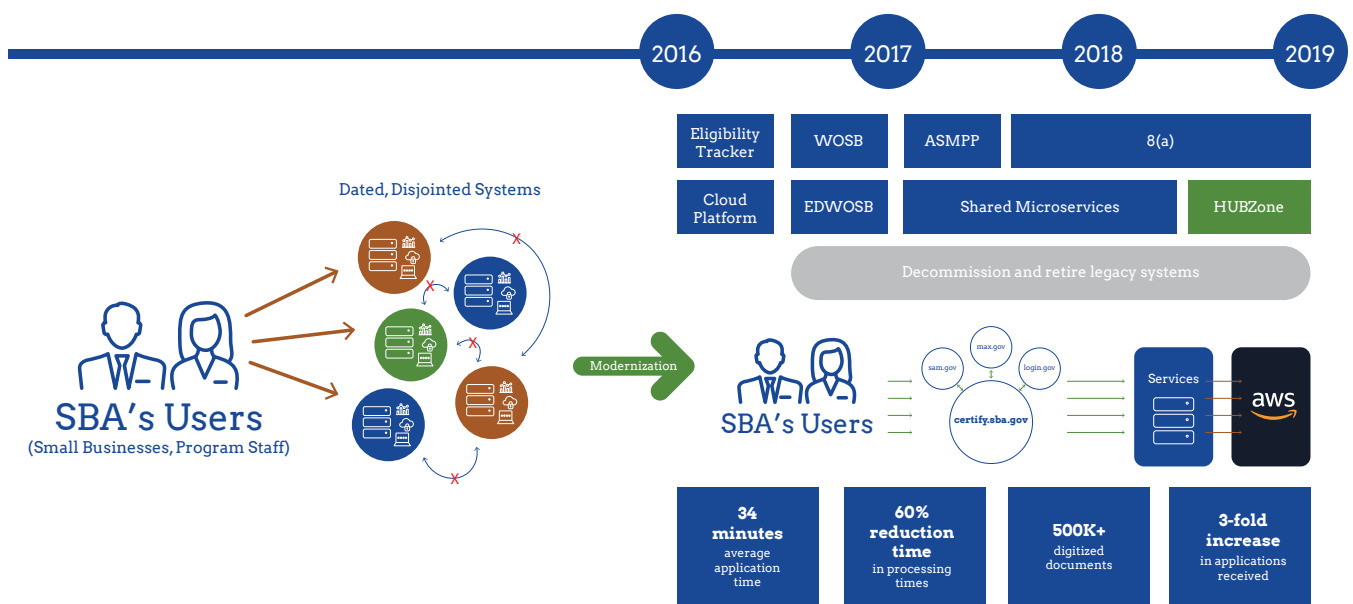
critical roles until the SBA was fully up and running on its own. Just a few of the roles they filled included:

- » Product Managers
- » Project Managers
- » Solutions Architects
- » Business Analysts
- » Designers
- » Security Engineers
- » Full Stack Developers
- » Security and Cloud Engineers
- » Service Desk Engineers
- » Support Desk Personnel

A Drastically Streamlined Solution

As a result of Enquizit's work, four different SBA programs were moved into one easy application system:

- » The 8(a) Business Development Program
- » The Women-Owned Small Business Program (WOSB)
- » Economically Disadvantaged WOSBs (EDWOSBs)
- » All Small Mentor Protégé Program (ASMPP)

Prior to the platform solution, business owners who qualified for more than one of these programs (for example, a woman-owned business in a disadvantaged location) would have had to fill out an application multiple times. The new platform streamlined the process, so they would only have to apply once. Amazingly, this reduced the burden of program application for firms from an average of 120 hours to less than 45 minutes.

A Unified Platform for Better Businesses

Today over 100,000 users interact with SBA digitally each year—without the need for paper. Prior to the platform, SBA personnel exchanged files with up to 2500 sheets of paper through the mail, causing long delays and expensive shipping costs. With the new application, firm records are now available for all SBA authorized personnel to view at any time, anywhere. As an added bonus, the reduction in paper and printer needs reduced costs dramatically for both SBA and participation firms. The speed has also drastically increased, with the SBA now able to process three times the number of applications with ease. Best of all? More business owners than ever can receive the help and information they need to plan, start, and grow their companies.

To speak with experts about how Enquizit helps government agencies get more accurate data in the AWS Cloud, go to enquizit.com.