

User research for cloud-based digital services

Users are at the heart of the Government Digital Service (GDS) standards. Our user research professionals build strong product foundations by thoroughly investigating user needs for cloud-based, multi-channel digital services, including mobile. Research findings can save many times the investment made, leading to a fit-for-purpose solution that encourages user adoption.

Features

- Contextual research to understand the problem through ethnographic observation
- In-depth interviews and workshops to understand user needs and motivations
- Card sorting to understand users' mental models and shape designs
- Moderated usability testing and iterating designs regularly, reducing risk
- User testing omni-channel journeys using hypotheses and low-fidelity prototypes
- Assisted digital, supporting users with lower digital skills and confidence
- Accessibility improvements for users with access needs and disabilities
- Analytics to identify potentially problematic pages or user behaviour
- Multivariate and A/B testing, comparing the performance of different designs
- Secure data collection and management, including ethnicity data and GDPR

Benefits

- Mitigates risk by aligning products and services with validated needs
- Identifies features that improve user experience and satisfaction
- Eliminates under-performing ideas early
- Validates design and technology choices throughout delivery
- Ensures that accessibility and access requirements are met, including mobile
- Solves real user problems in the migration to cloud-based services
- Supports designers to make evidence-based product design decisions
- Reduces development costs and customer support overheads
- Encourages cross-departmental goal alignment for the product or service
- Creates a user-centric culture across digital, mobile and other channels

Our approach to user research

Equal Experts helps our clients implement, migrate to, and maintain high-quality cloud-based digital products and services that meet user needs and deliver business value early and often. To achieve this, our experienced teams apply proven user research

practices that create a user-centred culture, de-risk delivery and maximise the outcome's effectiveness.

Our user researchers have great experience in the Government Digital Service standards, in research and user experience best practices and ethics principles, and in supporting design and delivery teams to make seamless, accessible, omnichannel cloud-based user journeys, across digital and mobile. Our user researchers take overall responsibility for understanding user needs, motivations and behaviours and delivering actionable insights for implementation.

User research to support the migration and evolution of cloud-based services

Our user researchers conduct ethnographic observation to understand the behaviour of users in their natural environment. This observational work is complemented by in-depth interviews with users and stakeholders to further understand the problems users face. Our researchers are experienced in producing appropriate deliverables, such as user needs, personas and user journey maps, that help delivery teams to understand the users of the cloud-based service they are building or maintaining.

Our user researchers are skilled at selecting the right research method to test a hypothesis.

Usability testing helps ensure that the functionality the team implements meets real user needs and behaviours. Our researchers utilise a range of testing techniques, such as remote or face-to-face usability testing as well as pop-up or guerrilla research, depending on the requirements of the project and stage of the service or product lifecycle, whether initial implementation and migration to the cloud, or supporting and evolving the live service. This gives us a thorough understanding of user needs and behaviours, and means that we base our design decisions on hard data rather than assumptions.

It is this commitment to understanding user needs and placing them at the heart of all we deliver that results in customer satisfaction scores of 85% and above.

We also create mockups, wireframes and prototypes to get fast, actionable feedback from the business and from users. Later on, we monitor analytics from the Live or Beta service (including A/B and multivariate testing techniques) and continue testing with users to get detailed feedback, and to continue making refinements throughout delivery and live service operation.

Tight integration of user research, interaction design, content design and delivery means we are able to respond to user feedback very rapidly and deliver a continually improving product.

Accessibility & Assisted Digital research

Two factors that make designing for government projects different are the additional emphasis on Accessibility and Assisted Digital requirements. Accessibility is a central factor in every project we take part in. Assisted Digital is a factor in all of our service design work. But the degree to which these two factors are important often makes a significant difference between our private and public sector projects. We fully support the government's commitment to deliver its services to all citizens.

Accessibility

Our user researchers aim to include people with access needs in each sprint's research activity, to understand their needs throughout the development and ongoing maintenance of the live service. We have found that the most productive way to deal with assumptions about Accessibility is to focus not on a given 'disability', but rather to look at the context of users (eg. users with screen readers or users in hectic/busy environments) and design around this to enable them using assistive technology (eg. keyboard shortcuts and screen reader technology).

Assisted digital research

We know that not all users are online - often because they don't have access to a device or connectivity, or because they lack the motivation, ability, skills or confidence to engage digitally.

Our researchers are skilled in evaluating the digital skills of users throughout research and aim to include users who are lower on the digital inclusion scale in research in every sprint. Through this research, our researchers can ensure that people lower on the digital inclusion scale can use the service and identify appropriate assisted digital support to encourage and equip people with the skills needed to eventually self-serve.

As more of our users find themselves able to use our digital or mobile services, we'll be able to increasingly focus on helping people become capable of using and benefiting from the internet and helping those who really can't, ensuring that no one is digitally excluded.

Research ethics and data management

Our experienced research consultants are skilled in ethical research conduct, obtaining informed consent from people taking part in research, and non-disclosure agreements where required.

Our user researchers ensure that participant data is collected, stored and managed in line with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

Examples of user research in action

Equal Experts applied its expertise in user research as the Home Office's delivery partner on the UKVI online visa applications project, named the Best Public Sector Project in the Computer Weekly European User Awards.

The new service, a government 'exemplar', replaced existing paper-based and multiple online processes for applicants in the UK, and a legacy online process for applications outside the UK, and the Beta and Live services were continuously improved based on evolving user needs. It provided the Home Office with the tools to centrally manage all visa products through a product catalogue.

Users were at the heart of the process throughout, as we:

- Moderated usability testing, both face-to-face and remotely, with overseas users;
- Analysed and reported on user research, using it to drive the design process;
- Promoted the value of user research to team members and stakeholders, helping them understand the importance of building a service that met user needs;
- Recorded and edited video clips of testing, including making persuasive multi-user 'supercuts' to assist decision-making.

So important was user research, it demonstrably changed the course of the project. We ensured all team members – including developers and analysts – received 6 hours of 'exposure time' to real users each fortnight. Findings from Chinese users triggered the development of the Product Catalogue, which contained all of The Home Office's visa products in a single codified format. This made it easier to update systems in line with policy changes – and better meet the needs of users around the world.

The streamlined user journey for the new visa application service significantly improved back-end business processes for management and approval of applications, and drove efficiency improvements across the organisation.

Our emphasis on the user at all points was also reflected in the positive feedback the project gained from those users. In a survey, 85% of respondents agreed the new service was easy to use and there was a clear time reduction in online application completion. We also saw positive feedback from Home Office caseworkers, thanks to reduced data entry effort and shorter end-to-end caseworking processes, and a reduction in contact centre calls from customers in China (the first area to go live).

Services

We have four core UK-based teams that provide expertise and advice to the organisation, our clients and our partners:

Data and AI

The Data and AI service helps clients make better use of data and create powerful AI solutions that improve and transform any business. We use our deep expertise in data engineering to improve the quality of data that flows through the organisation, providing better insights into customers and operations. Applying our expertise in MLOps, Generative AI, AI in the SDLC and algorithms, we help upskill client teams, automate key services and create new ones.

Design and Product

The Design and Product service helps clients increase adoption and user satisfaction by designing exceptional digital products and services. We use our expertise in user-centred design and product management to discover and solve the most valuable problems, aligned to a client's digital strategy. We help to create delightful customer experiences that deliver real business value, increased user engagement, better brand reputation and additional revenue.

Technology Strategy

Our Technical Strategy service helps teams to confidently navigate the technology landscape and make decisions that will sustain long-term value. Our expertise covers all aspects of technology strategy, including architectural choices, operating model changes and the adoption of emerging technologies. Using our extensive industry and technology experience, we help to plan the practical steps clients need to be ready for the future.

Modernisation and Platforms

Our Modernisation and Platforms service helps to accelerate time-to-value and reduce total cost of ownership, while scaling digital products and systems. Using modern engineering practices, we help to build and run cloud-native services and improve heritage

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systems. We bring deep expertise in cloud architectures, secure delivery, “you build it, you run it”, and platform engineering on AWS, Azure and GCP clouds.

Team

Our core culture and business model prioritise providing value and doing what is best for all our stakeholders, particularly our clients, rather than maximising short-term profits and shareholder returns. Our founders sold the business to an Employee-Owned Trust (EOT) in May 2024 to secure the long-term future of our collaborative approach, highlighting this commitment. The EOT trustees include the founders and representatives of our employees, Associates and clients, ensuring the interests of all stakeholders are considered and balanced in our operations.

Equal Experts is a worldwide network of technology experts who are dedicated to driving innovation. We have Business Units in the UK (London and Manchester), USA, South Africa, Germany, the Netherlands, Australia and India. Our resourcing model is based on a core of permanent senior consultants and a supply chain of 4,000+ carefully selected, expert, independent SME consultants - our Associate network. On a typical engagement, we pass ~£2 in every £3 of our contract income directly to this network, creating opportunities for entrepreneurship and helping new SMEs to grow.

90% of our consultants have more than 12 years of experience (average more than 18 years) in the development, delivery, operation and maintenance of digital services using agile methods. Many have significantly more and, in some cases, are global influencers, authors and presenters. Their maturity and pragmatism mean they are highly collaborative, happy to transfer knowledge and keen to help clients build internal capability.

We have grown organically, mostly through personal referrals, prioritising quality, experience and cultural fit above all else. After a rigorous selection process, experts are added to our network, whether we need them immediately or in the future.

We select the most suitable people for any contract role from this large pool, not just from a bench of off-charge employees. Our model is resilient and efficient; we form small expert teams, reducing cost and risk for our clients, while achieving outcomes faster than less experienced teams. Our experts train and upskill the whole supply chain, including client staff and those of other suppliers. We have delivered many public and private sector systems (e.g., for HMRC, HMPO, Defra, DWP and MoJ), including CNI, over the past 17+ years using this model. Our approach is data-driven, user-focused and sustainable, allowing us to deliver results quickly and efficiently, using small teams of real experts.

Our standard working model for teams is hybrid remote/on-site, with a core generally based close to client offices, minimising travel costs and environmental impact. This ensures they can be on-site for workshops, meetings and onboarding activities, and can work collaboratively with client team members, stakeholders and other suppliers. In the words of one client, “*your consultants truly leave their Equal Experts badges at the door*”.

Our focus on senior talent means that all our consultants have the skills and experience required to thrive in dynamic, challenging client environments. It means we can focus on work that adds real value, rather than micro-managing more junior consultants. Our non-hierarchical structure also allows us to operate with lower overheads. For our teams, this creates a mature, pragmatic and innovative working environment, where they can implement the best solutions of their already distinguished careers. And for our clients, it translates to better services, delivered faster and at lower overall cost. We were ranked 2nd in Glassdoor’s UK Best Places to Work 2025, up from 4th in 2024, and 15th in Newsweek’s Most Loved Workplaces 2022.

For more information and case studies, please visit <https://www.equalexperts.com/> or contact us at solutions@equalexperts.com.

Roles

Collectively, our consultants have the multi-disciplinary experience and expertise needed for successful transformation to cloud-first delivery, live service maintenance and new operating models. Our network gives us fast and flexible access to the DDaT skills our clients need. We have specialists in all areas required for digital success, including:

- Delivery managers
- Change managers
- Product managers
- Engagement managers
- Strategic advisors
- Security specialists
- Data scientists
- Data engineers
- Data architects
- Technical leads
- Technical architects
- DevOps consultants
- Developers
- Testers

- Business and performance analysts
- Accessibility experts
- Service designers
- User experience designers
- Content designers
- User researchers

When a client needs specialists or niche skills, we can rapidly and confidently engage with other organisations in our established ecosystem of proven partners. EE interviews each partner consultant to ensure a high level of knowledge and cultural fit before we assign them to clients.

Public sector clients

We're proud to be one of the top suppliers to the public sector via the G-Cloud and DOS frameworks. Our services are also available through RM6190 Technology Services 4, RM6195 Big Data and Analytics (the only supplier on all 6 capabilities), RM6335 DALAS (Lot 2a) and DPS Frameworks including RM3764 Cyber Security 3, RM6173 Automation Marketplace, RM6094 Spark, RM6200 Artificial Intelligence and RM6235 Space-Enabled and Geospatial Services.

The Equal Experts approach has a successful track record of delivery across the private and public sectors. Some recent award-winning deliveries include:

- HMPO's passport renewal service,
 - ranked #1 public service with a score of 81.2/100 in the July 2025 ICS customer satisfaction survey.
 - Winner of Public Sector Project of the Year and Development Team of the Year at the UK IT Industry Awards 2024.
- HMRC's Data Platform Services Core Engineering Platform, winners of Computing DevOps Excellence Awards 2025 Best Implementation of DevSecOps.
- John Lewis & Partners Best Implementation of DevSecOps at the DevOps Excellence Industry Awards 2023

We know what it takes to implement and support cloud-based applications within complex public sector organisations and across large multi-vendor programmes. We understand and adhere to the GDS digital service standards for delivering solutions and handling and securing data within critical national systems. We have experience in consulting, deploying and supporting security-accredited solutions and have passed numerous GDS assessments. Many of our consultants hold current SC clearance (some have DV) as they have previously worked with public sector clients.

Equal Experts has helped implement digital services to government digital service standards (including passing many formal GDS service standard assessments) for:

- His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC)
- Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA)
- The Home Office and His Majesty's Passport Office (HMPO)
- Ministry of Justice (MoJ), His Majesty's Prisons and Probations Service (HMPPS) and His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS)
- Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)
- Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC)
- Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS)
- Border Force
- Department for Education (DfE)
- Registers of Scotland
- Office for National Statistics (ONS)
- Intellectual Property Office (IPO)
- States of Guernsey
- Cabinet Office
- Government Digital Service (GDS)
- Valuation Office Agency (VOA)

Planning

To build detailed knowledge of the context and domain for any project, an initial phase of planning, definition and knowledge transfer will generally take place at the start of an engagement.

We have found that this takes place most effectively through a short time-bound inception to develop a shared understanding and agreement on vision and objectives across a broad stakeholder group. This covers the business, technical and user aspects of the project and the outputs may include user personas and scenarios, key user journeys, as-is and desired business processes, a prioritised backlog of user stories, technical constraints and vision, and a release roadmap and plan. The techniques and principles applied are also used on an ongoing basis throughout the course of delivery, to ensure the solutions developed are fit for purpose and meet real and changing user needs.

This initial inception phase can be contracted separately if required.

Setup and migration

In addition to ongoing development and operation of live cloud-based services, we can help with the initial set up and migration as part of a transition to cloud. We look for opportunities to automate processes (for example, test, deploy) that will yield real benefit and high ROI. Our approach helps to address integration, dependencies and risk early. We capture actionable metrics to measure and manage progress towards meeting the agreed success criteria and KPIs identified for building and operating the service. The highly collaborative, interactive processes we follow foster continual learning and improvement of services. They help to establish and evolve the overarching service design, management processes and the team capabilities.

We can ensure projects hit the ground running through our experience in designing, configuring and setup of many continuous delivery and automated cloud deployment environments. These techniques allow software to be repeatably and reliably deployed and tested through each stage into production on the cloud. We have substantial experience when it comes to the tooling required for continuous delivery and automated software deployment, greatly facilitating the software set up, build and migration process, which increases programme productivity and reduces project risk and cost.

Quality assurance and performance testing

We hold ISO9001:2015 Quality Management System certification. All our consultants have extensive experience in both manual and automated testing, including performance testing, continuous integration and delivery into production environments at scale. With all clients, we actively encourage the adoption of robust and meaningful automated test coverage, delivery and test techniques, to reduce risk and safely increase delivery velocity. We are happy to work with a client's existing quality management system (QMS) where appropriate.

Security services

We hold ISO27001:2022 Information Security Management System, Cyber Essentials and Cyber Essentials Plus certifications.

We can provide the following security services if required:

- Security strategy
- Security risk management
- Security design
- Security incident management

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- Security audit services

Training

For every client, we aim to transfer and embed knowledge of technology and process innovation. Our consultants have the expertise, skills and enthusiasm to help transfer knowledge of new technologies and ways of working to our clients' team members, upskilling staff and helping to build their internal delivery competence and capability. This improves internal competencies and builds long-term sustainable capability, as clients migrate to modern cloud-based products and services. We tailor particular practices to address specific organisational constraints – we recognise that every organisation is different and there is no “one size to fit all”.

We tend not to offer classroom-based training as our consultants are happy to share their knowledge throughout a project. They take responsibility for helping individual client team members adopt new practices and ways of working.

Ongoing support

Our operational philosophy is “you build it, you run it”. The delivery team responsible for the development of a live service usually also takes responsibility for its operation. We have found that development teams which support their own products are motivated to deliver higher quality, more robust and maintainable code.

When a service is live with real users, we expect the delivery team to provide 2nd line (infrastructure, in conjunction with hosting support agreements) and 3rd line (applications) support during business hours. We can agree on an appropriate model for 24/7 on-call coverage if required - see our G-Cloud On-Call Support offering for details. We typically establish an on-call rota with delivery team members assigned weekly.

Our experience is that digital services are never really finished and that it is important to retain some level of investment to allow the addition of new features as the needs of customers (both internal and external) change. Our design of the end-to-end service can include establishing Service Level Agreements for ongoing service evolution and operational support (ensuring agreed levels of service availability).

User support

We provide an engagement manager on all G-Cloud engagements with responsibility for ensuring clients objectives are met and for addressing any issues with service delivery. Our engagement managers act as an escalation point and can be reached via phone or

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email to respond to issues beyond the control of the team providing the service. Engagement management is included within our service pricing.

When a service is live with real users, we expect the delivery team to provide 2nd-line (infrastructure, in conjunction with hosting support agreements) and 3rd-line (applications) support during business hours, within the agreed service cost. We can agree on an appropriate model for 24/7 on-call coverage if required - see our G-Cloud On-Call Support offering for details. We typically establish an on-call rota with delivery team members assigned weekly.

Social Value, the Environment and CSR

Our values and ethos extend beyond our organisation and people, and we take our corporate social responsibility seriously. We are committed to working with all our clients to share our knowledge and learnings, and contribute to their CSR goals, e.g. we will facilitate discussions with their designated digital sustainability leads, to collaborate on environmental policy goals, discuss current practices for greening software and agree enhancements aligned with industry policies, like the Greening Government Strategy.

We willingly collaborate closely with our clients, other suppliers, competitors and the wider ecosystem to discuss, share and test innovative environmental and social value ideas and initiatives, to improve sustainable practices and create added value throughout any contract.

We will follow our proven social value methodologies for any G-Cloud 15 contract, aligned with the UK's Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, PPN002 (PA2023) and the Social Value Model, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals, to actively create additional opportunities to develop, measure and improve social value for our client and their entire supply chain. In a recent [Government Transformation Magazine interview](#), Mike Potter, ex-UK Gov CDO recalled his HMRC experience partnering with us for transformative results. *"We didn't just buy their capability - we bought their culture,"* he said. *"Cultural alignment is key. When you pick partners who share your values and ways of working, you find areas of mutual advantage."*

We review, update and publish our Carbon Reduction Plan, Modern Slavery and EDI statements annually, are a Disability Confident employer, a member of the Business Disability Forum and a participant in the Government Digital Sustainability Alliance (GDSA). Our commitment to providing a fulfilling workplace for everyone is reflected in

Glassdoor's Best Places to Work in the UK, voted for by our staff, ranking us 4th in 2024, 2nd in 2025.

We complete the [EcoVadis](#) assessment tool, which evaluates performance across four dimensions: Environment, Labour and Human Rights, Ethics and Sustainable Procurement. We complete the assessment, create an improvement plan and review and update it annually. We willingly share the results with clients and use their feedback and learnings to influence our improvement plans.

Examples of other social value initiatives for clients include:

HMRC Joint Value Initiatives: we work closely with HMRC to organise and fund JVs, e.g.:

- [School visits](#) to encourage children to pursue STEM careers & find future data engineers,
- Data Engineering Academy - supporting HMRC to onboard and upskill new starters and develop their technical expertise through bootcamps and placements on EE projects,
- Hosting the [Women in Tech & Leadership Conference 2025](#) in collaboration with HMRC's Women in Tech Network.

Hace: We co-funded a [project](#) to develop an AI-based data analysis tool to objectively quantify a company's Child Labour performance.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF): We staffed a pro bono project to build the [Malaria Anticipation Project \(MAP\)](#), deployed in Lankien, South Sudan and being planned for Anka, Nigeria.

John Lewis: We shifted to lower-footprint GCP cloud data centres in Switzerland to meet JL's environmental sustainability goals.

Government: We are an active member of the Government Digital Sustainability Alliance ([See more details here](#)) and are actively working with Defra to implement exemplar projects such as:

- Implementing Green coding Standards ([See Version 1 Github](#)) in our teams working with Defra to help support learnings for wider Government.
- Working with Defra and our partner [Heata](#) to develop an innovative decentralised cloud compute project. The aim is to reduce the carbon footprint of cloud workloads by 80% and heat farmers' domestic water tanks to save them money.