Reinventing Government IT

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Agenda

- A personal trilemma
- Government IT - what it's usually like
- Enter beta, the "State Incubator"
- Process & techniques
- Infrastructure issues
- Pain points
- Changing the organization

Rewind the clock to four years back. I'd been an Agile consultant/coach for 10 years after 10 years as a developer, and looking for new directions.

There were two universes I knew fairly well, the first that of startups or small businesses; the second that of large corporations, where a fair amount of my consulting was done. And one that I knew nothing at all, public sector work.

	Startups	BigCos	Government
Innovation:	high	low(ish)	low
Autonomy:	high (at a cost)	low	low
Ethics:	often dodgy	often dodgy	fair to high

This is a bit more rational than the process I really went through, but I'd been leaning towards startups - my dream job was CTO of a 3D printing startup - for the reasons outlined here. I value new stuff, I value autonomy quite a lot, and I have a bad habit of personal integrity that only gets worse as I get older.

Government IT: track record in France

- SIRHEN (320M€), scrapped 2018

- Louvois (465M€), scrapped 2016

- ONP (350M€), scrapped 2014

Out of the blue came this offer to work in the public sector, in government IT. Frankly, the track record was somewhat abysmal. Large project failures abound…

Government IT
culturally speaking

- Waterfall oriented:

    - top-down

    - document-bound

    - CYA-driven

- Technologically conservative

- …except for a propensity to jump on bandwagons

And in terms of culture, we were at the opposite of what I had in mind. Very conservative and top-down, very "suits and ties", with the occasional bout of craziness about AI or blockchain.
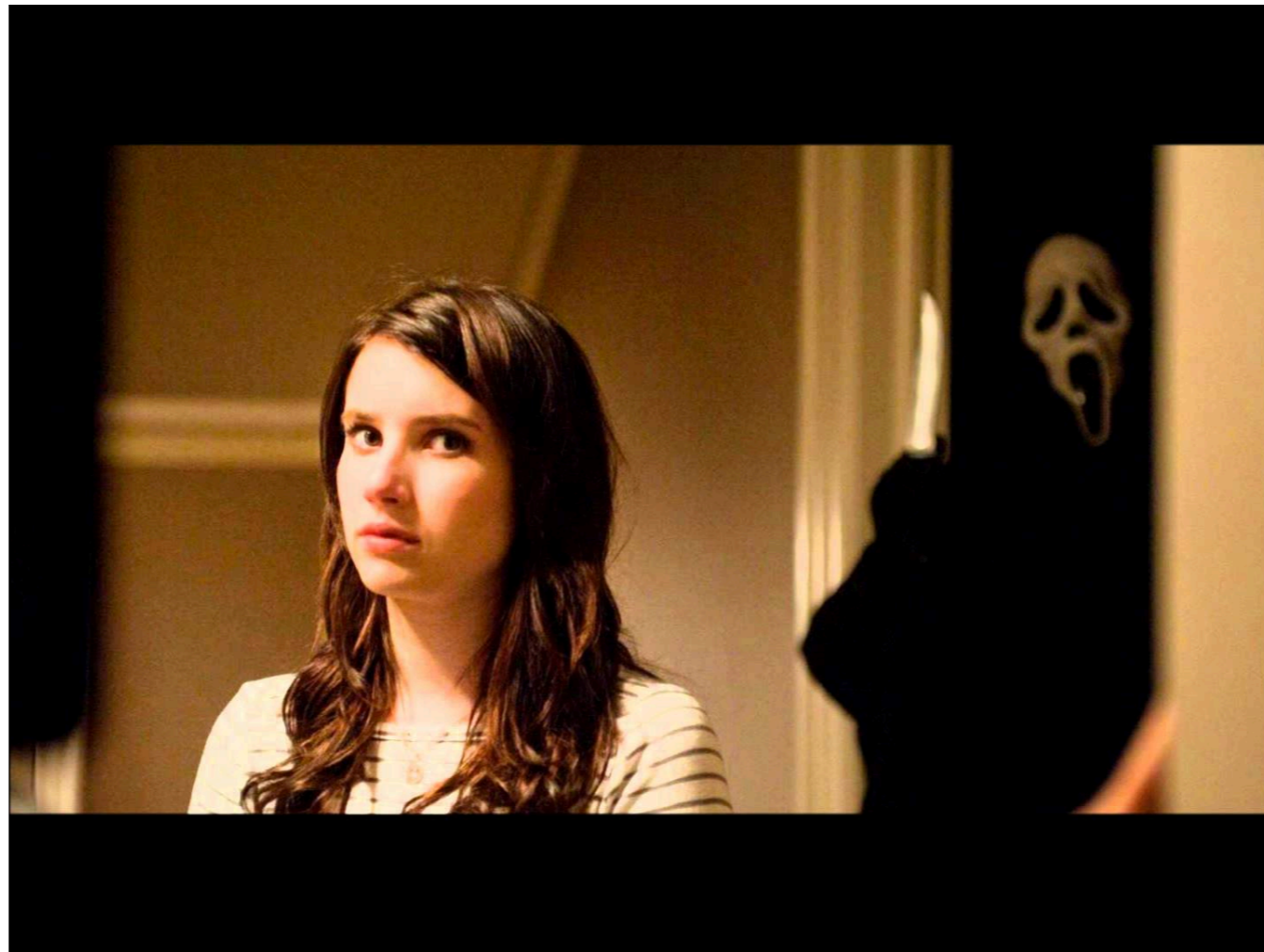
You would think that every instinct at that point would have told me to run… and I almost did. The rest of this is, in a way, to convey the vision that made it irresistible to me in the end.
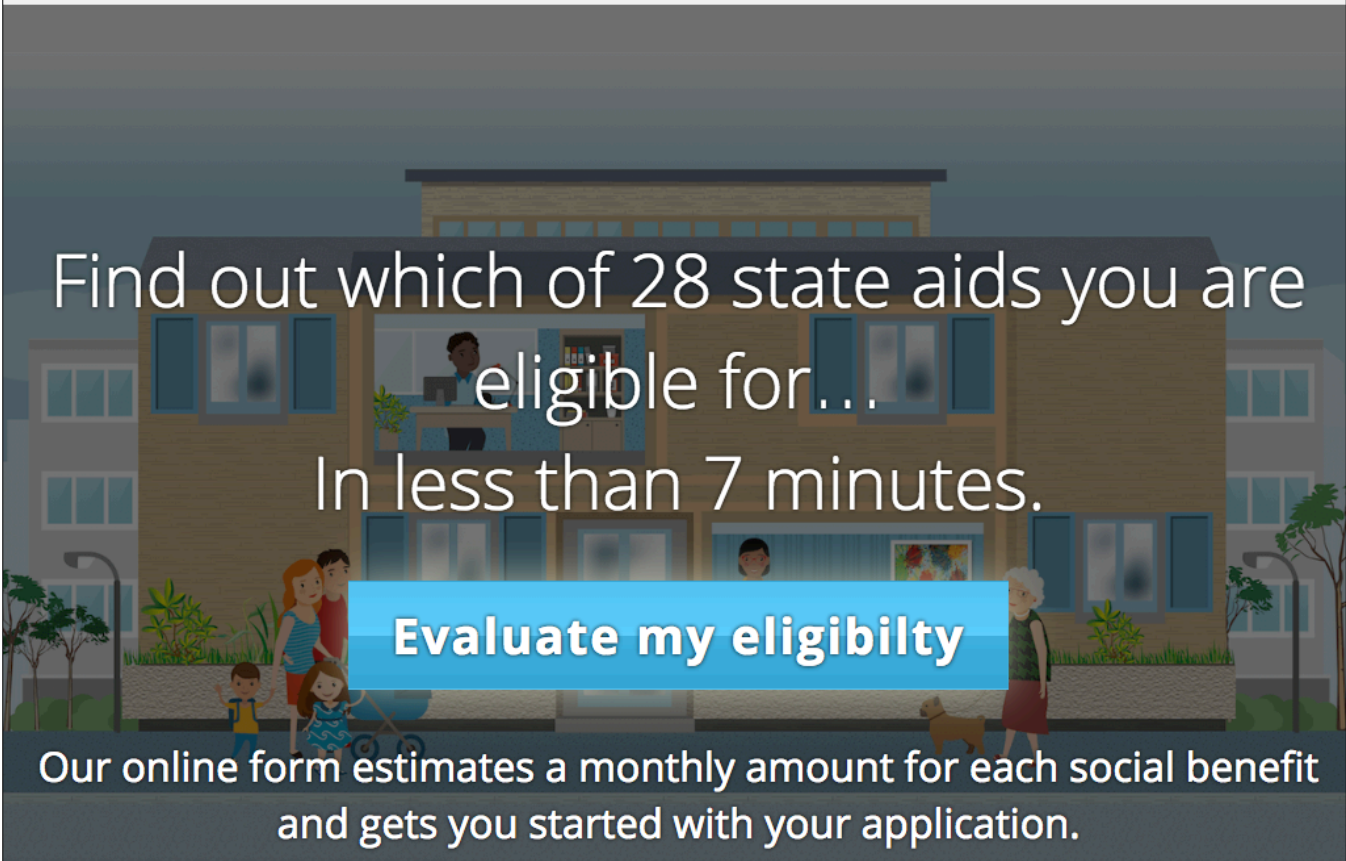
Government 2.0?
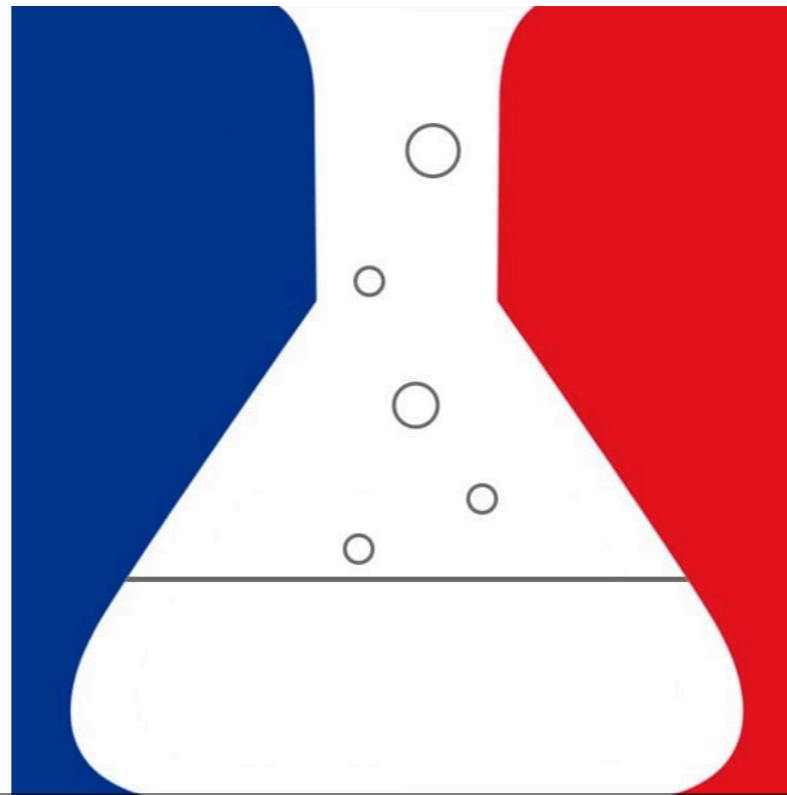
The outfit I was joining deals in what we call "State Startups". These are not actually startups in the financial sense: they operate in service of the public sector, with no private investment and no private profits.

"State Startups"

The aim is to create "digital public services" – to provide what you would expect of a government if it took full advantage of the technologies of the 21st century.

Find out which of 28 state aids you are eligible for…
In less than 7 minutes.

Evaluate my eligibilty

Our online form estimates a monthly amount for each social benefit and gets you started with your application.

Here's one of these public services that serve as our exemplars for success. It's targeted at the least privileged of the French population, and solves a problem which no administrative body had solved previously: starting from the user's perspective, asking only the relevant questions, tell me how the State will help me if I'm in a tight spot financially or otherwise.

|	Startups	BigCos	Government	State Incubators
	Innovation: high	Innovation: low(ish)	Innovation: low	Innovation: low to fair
	Autonomy: high (at a cost)	Autonomy: low	Autonomy: low	Autonomy: high
	Ethics: often dodgy	Ethics: often dodgy	Ethics: fair to high	Ethics: high

The outfit offered a new set of trade-offs. If we revisit the earlier comparison, we're looking at middling levels of innovation - a lot of "public services" are actually just forms, but I'd enjoy lots of autonomy, and most importantly a "business goal" I could endorse with no ethical reservations.

Doubling period ~1yr

Legend: Agents DINSIC | Autres agents publics | Indépendant·e·s | Prestataires
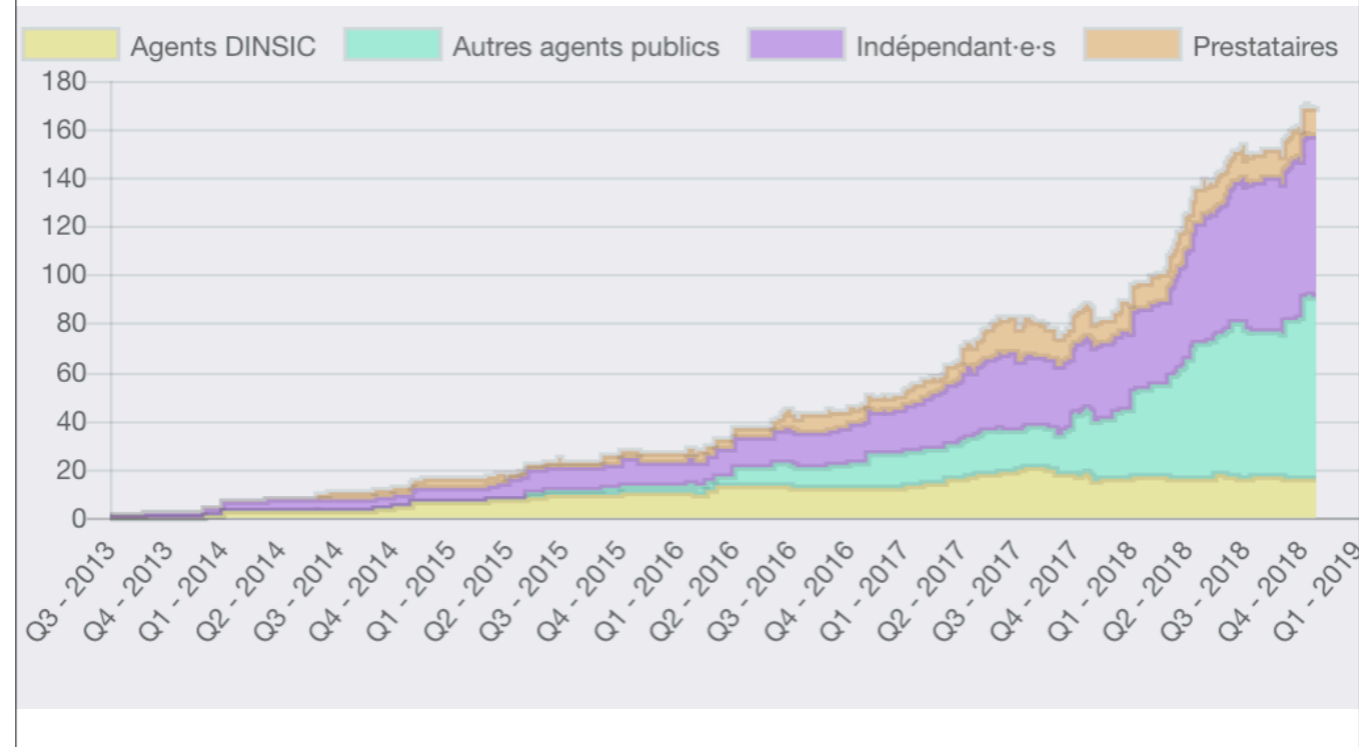
We enjoy a high degree of growth. From 20 people when I joined, we now number close to 200. Note however that this is a "community" rather than a single unified entity.

Process
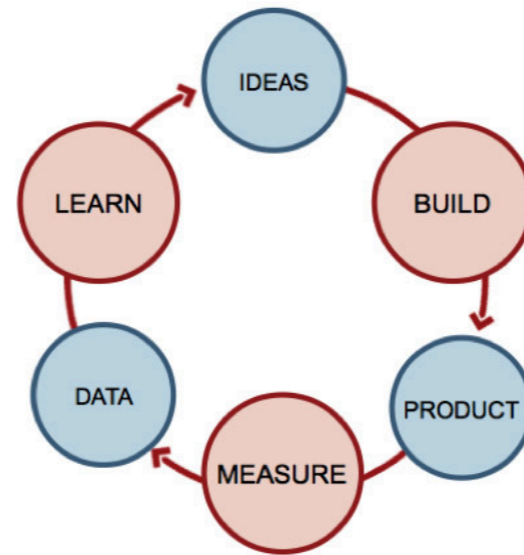
Let's talk about process. We are very much taking a leaf from the "Lean Startup" book, yet another instance of using the concept of "startup" without needing to refer to a corporate status.
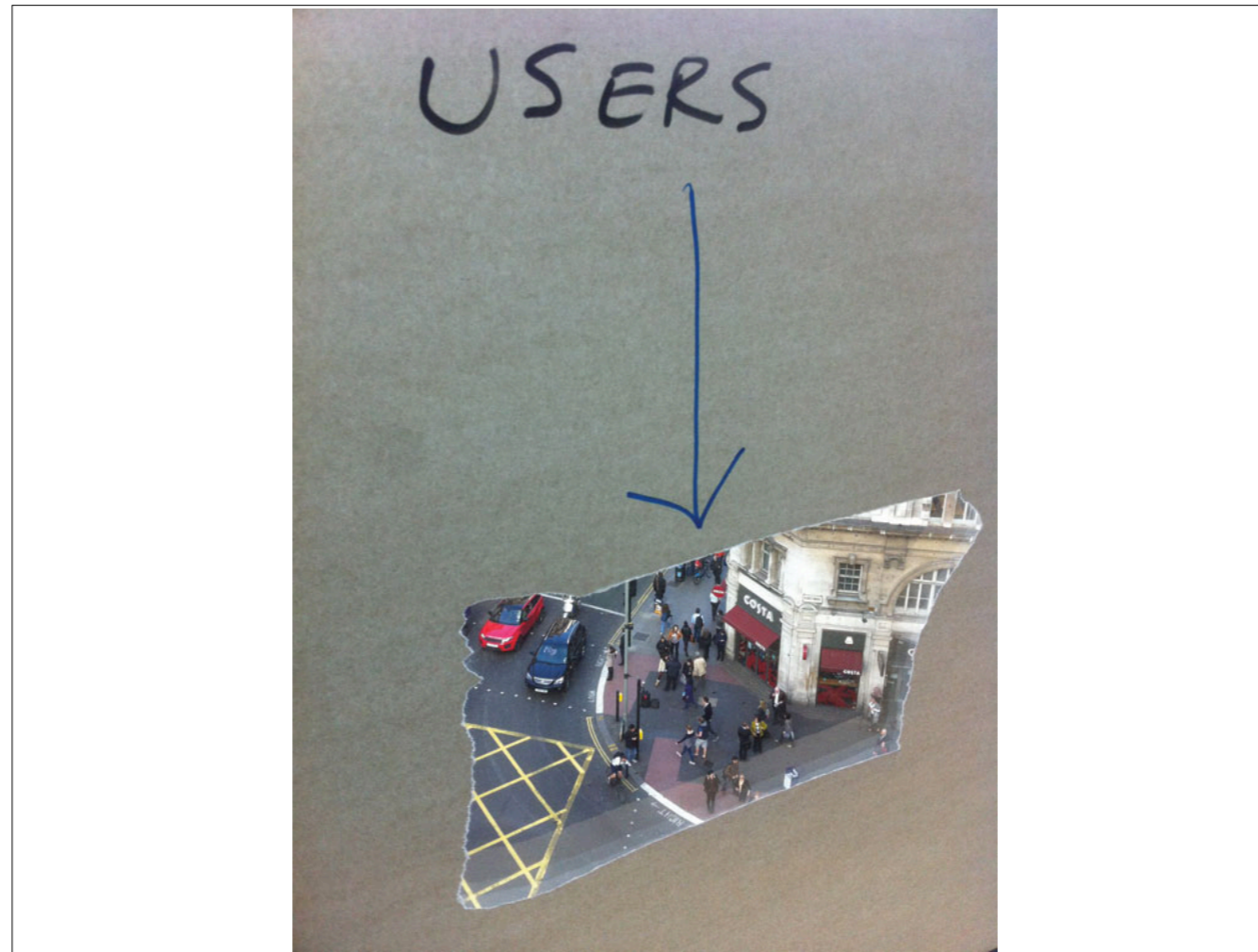
We only work on real problems that citizens have. One of the items of our manifesto is "consider user needs before government needs". We often turn down work that government agencies ask of us if we think it's unlikely to benefit end users rapidly.

The "intrapreneur"

We set up self-organized, self-directed teams with one "intrapreneur" from government agencies at the helm. This is the one role we've had to invent from scratch. Ideally, this is someone who's worked in public service: for instance, someone from the unemployment agency. They know better than anyone what's not helping the unemployed. We give them the skills they need to run a small Internet software company… we've found out that means a lot of skills !

Infrastructure

We run our services in the public cloud if that's the way to ship faster. Many of our services actually start life as just a landing page, so we've used Github Pages or Strikingly quite often to get started. We can then move to PaaS like Heroku or its French equivalent Scalingo as the need dictates. Some (but relatively few) of our teams opt for more traditional VMs - usually in public data centers; we stay away from "government-specific networks" as they come with high bureaucracy.

Security
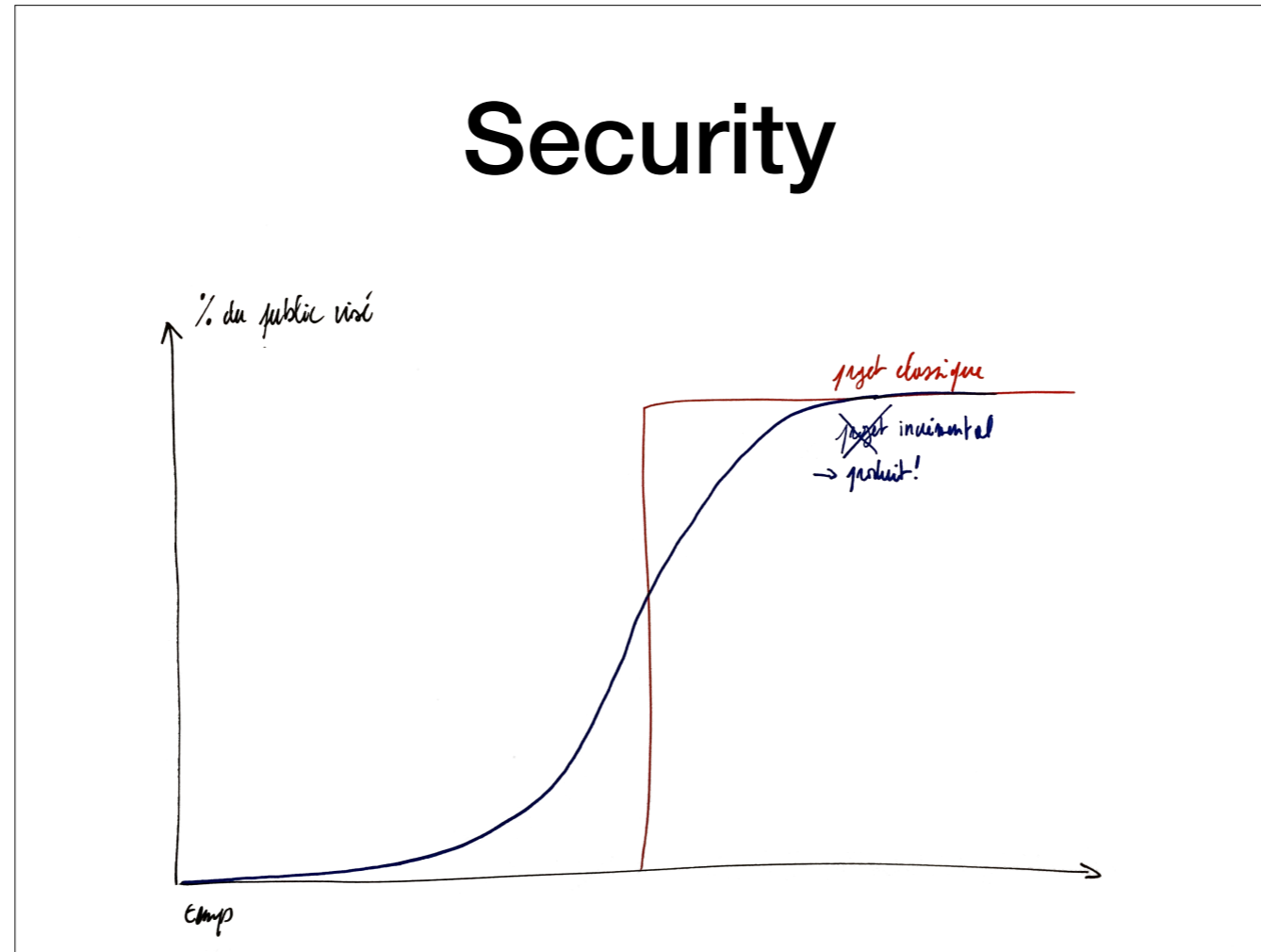
We also have an interesting story around security. Who here is part of an organization that has mandated security procedures, such as audits? D'you love them or hate them? We hate them too. But we found an unexpected ally in the national Cyber-security agency. Like us, they prefer *real* security over security theater. The one thing we had to negotiate was the difference between "product" and "project", but once they understood they supported us.

Security
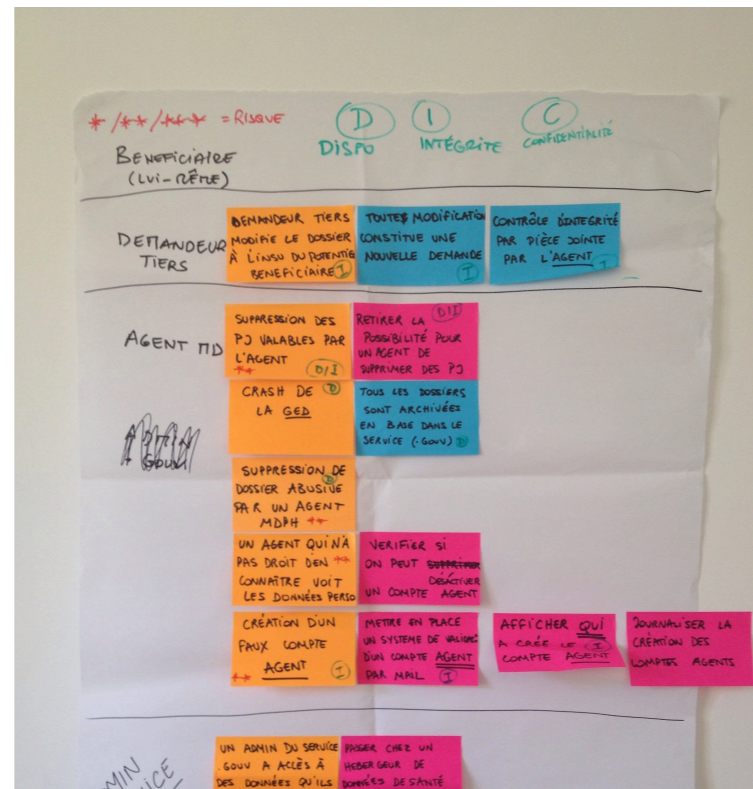
So our only mandated security procedure is to have a workshop every so often with the whole team and just the team. It works a lot like an agile team retrospective, except the topic is security risks. We frame this as "what keeps you awake at night", or "your product is in the front page of the newspaper, but in a bad way".

Pain points

Our pain points largely revolve around outdated and over-rigidly interpreted procurement strategies. Too much of our energy is still spent fighting bureaucracy on matters like hiring and paying for small expenses. Our budgets are a tiny fraction of what the expensive government IT failures have wasted for taxpayers… yet we find ourselves fighting for money all the time. It's much harder to get a few hundred thousand euros to spend than a few hundred million!

Pain points
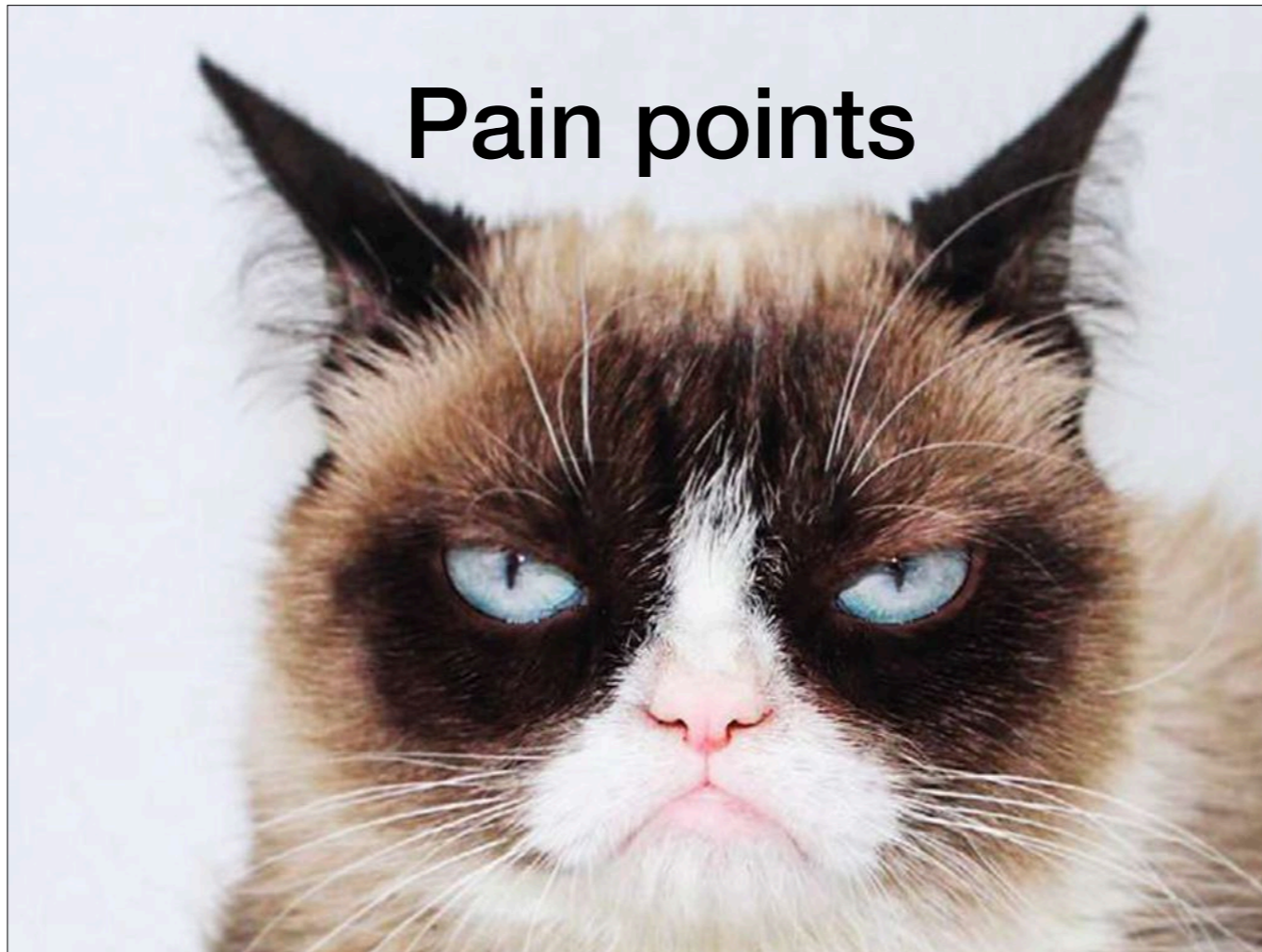
Another set of issues arises from the fact that we are a collection of small autonomous teams, not one homogenous organization. This means that the Agile coach in me is always frustrated; there's always something I wish people would do systematically - TDD, refactor, use Heroku, run retrospectives. And sometimes they don't, and sometimes they suffer in predictable ways.

Changing the organization

One puzzle for such an organization is how to grow. As I said earlier we're a community, not a single entity. We refused all along to be "the ones responsible for innovation in all of government". It's too big a job for any one org, and we would have become rigid and bureaucratic as we grew. The solution ? Encourage other departments to create their own incubator - a "swarming off" strategy. We now have 6 different incubators.

Yet another Manifesto

- User needs before government needs

- Managing results over dictating means

- Continuous improvement over following a plan

Here's what our shared values look like. There are lots of things we would have liked to put in there, like keeping teams small, or having the "intrapreneurs" come from line jobs. But we knew that the more we insisted on a long list of principles, the harder they would be to spread. So we pared it down to the bare essentials… and now I know where the temptation to write a manifesto comes from.
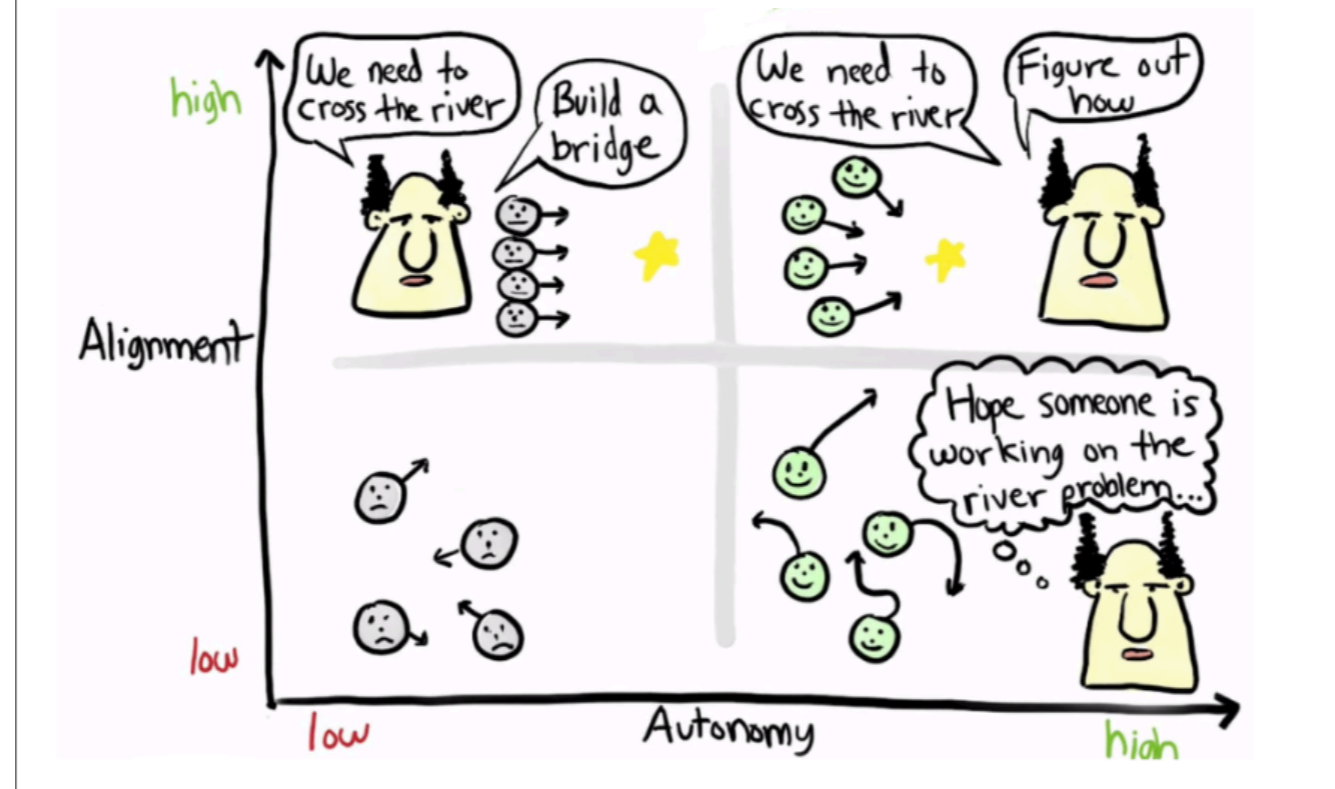
We are basically an organization with no managers. We rely on high alignment and high autonomy. We treat people as adults, empower them to make decisions wisely, and trust them to make the right choices.

It's ok to...
say "I don't know"
ask for more clarity
stay at home when you feel ill
say you don't understand
ask what acronyms stand for
ask why, and why not
forget things
introduce yourself
depend on the team
ask for help
not know everything
have quiet days
have loud days, to talk, joke and laugh
put your headphones on
say "No" when you're too busy
make mistakes
sing
sigh
not check your email out of hours
not check your email constantly during hours
just Slack it
walk over and ask someone face-to-face
go somewhere else to concentrate
offer feedback on other people's work
challenge things you're not comfortable with
say yes when anyone does a coffee run
prefer tea

We respect people's humanity; from GDS we stole https://gds.blog.gov.uk/2016/05/25/its-ok-to-say-whats-ok/ – we printed it up and displayed it on the walls of our offices just as they do. It's OK to say "I don't know", to ask questions, to say you don't understand something, to greet people in the morning in the way you prefer. Basically we have this strong ethos that it's OK to be human when you work with us. Of all the things I've told you about, this is perhaps the one thing I'd want to find if I ever moved on to a new job.

Basically, we are an organization that lives by this slogan of 1968 - be realistic, demand the impossible. That's what I'm offering as a takeaway, for you to do as you will.

Merci :)

- Road signs: Photo by Javier Allegue Barros on Unsplash

- Foosball: https://www.flickr.com/photos/yakshaving/3795071232

- Buildings: https://fr.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:La_Defense_dsc07204.jpg

- Government: https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:DSC00652_conseil_etat.jpg

- One man band: https://www.flickr.com/photos/wwward0/12182919023/

- Swarm: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MelbourneSwarm.JPG