Being Successful in Digital Government Projects

Birds of a Feather Session, dg.o2004

Moderator: Nancy Wiegand[1]

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Because the Digital Government Program requires partnerships between academic institutions and government agencies, various challenging issues occur. For example, how do people in academia find a government partner and topic (or vice versa)? Furthermore, because a collaborative effort is needed and there can be a culture difference between academia and government agencies, establishing successful relationships is vital. How can successful relationships be created and sustained? This panel addressed potential issues and problems with the intent to suggest solutions and best practices.

Topics discussed included sustainability regarding research prototypes becoming usable products, the benefit of pre-establishing relationships between PIs and Federal staff members, the need for periodic meetings to review goals, having a champion within the agency, and the results of a recent survey on collaboration between researchers and Federal agencies in the Digital Government Program.

The first topic addressed was that of sustainability, that is, who will fund the process of making a research prototype operational and, furthermore, maintain it? Solutions included a possible supplement from NSF to produce a more operational system or a potential grant from the NSF SBIR program. Involvement by other agencies or the private sector is another possibility. For example, someone mentioned a situation in which a private company ran a Web site with free e-government services in return for having access to the non-confidential information on the site.

The potential of obtaining funding from government partners has proved difficult, not just for product development. In fact, one person said several agencies he contacted specifically stated that they would not help fund a research project. However, someone else started a project using DG funds and then was able to leverage the prototype results to obtain money from other agencies, although the work had an applied nature. It also may be possible for the DG Program Director to intervene in the effort to obtain potential additional funding from other government agencies.

To avoid problems between the disparate goals of an agency requiring a finished product and academic researchers needing publications resulting from a prototype, it was recommended that PIs have periodic meetings with their government partners to review the goals of each side. In particular, PIs should make it clear early on that the research effort will not likely produce a robust system. Periodic meetings also help establish relationships and ameliorate the culture differences between the two groups. Phone and personal contacts were emphasized as being more effective than email communication.

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As to finding agencies and projects appropriate for the Digital Government Program, some PIs already had a history of working with an agency before submitting a DG proposal. Others, however, had someone from government "knock on their door" looking for a CS research partner. Because success can be better assured if there is a pre-existing relationship, it was suggested that a planning grant approach, rather than a full proposal, might be the best way to start for a new association between PIs and agencies. It was also noted that a champion within a government agency is very helpful to ensure the success of the project. In fact, more than one champion and/or a champion for different aspects of the project are most helpful, especially because particular individuals might leave the agency.

It was brought out that because agencies typically are already struggling to solve various problems as part of their mission, it was most useful for a PI to learn what those problems are rather than the PI developing a research idea and then presenting it to an agency.

Not discussed in this BOF session directly, but discussed in other sessions at the DG 2004 conference and integral to DG projects, is the interdisciplinary nature of DG work. Some DG projects cover more than one academic area requiring extra effort for PIs to learn terminology and concepts outside of their home discipline in addition to learning agencies' vocabularies. That is, between academic disciplines as well as between academic institutions and agencies, there are various differences in terminology, needs, perspectives, and modes of operation.

Howard Bradsher-Fredrick showed PowerPoint slides summarizing a survey conducted last fall addressing various issues related to success in DG projects. Most of the points were also brought up by participants in this session. In addition, in the report, it was noted that applied versus basic research might be more interesting and natural to Federal staff members because of the resemblance to working with contractors.

In summary, indicators of success in Digital Government projects include:

- Pre-existing or early and close relationships between PIs and agencies, including having champions within the agency
- Having had a planning grant, which is especially useful when starting a new relationship
- Frequent meetings to establish relationships and review goals from both sides
- PIs' communication early on regarding the prototype nature of results (versus robust product development and maintenance)
- Awareness that applied research may be more easily accepted by government agencies

The Digital Government Program Director made the point that the success of a DG project may not be known or judged until a few years after the project ends. That is, it is recognized that it may take time for research to become part of the practice of an agency. It was also noted that a healthy failure rate indicated NSF was taking the appropriate amount of risk.