

Managing Novelty and Cross-Agency Cooperation in Digital Government

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Introduction

This study examines the management challenges of managing digital government. In particular, we highlight two extraordinary (but not unique) managerial challenges that digital government poses: novelty and cross-agency cooperation. Digital government is novel because it offers some fundamentally new possibilities for how government does business. The management of digital government is, in significant part, the management of ideas, creativity, and knowledge. Digital government requires cross-agency cooperation because of functional needs for scale, consistency, and integration. We argue, therefore, that a hierarchical, silo-based model of management would be doomed to failure with respect to managing digital government. In this study, we examine how four governments that have adopted a project-based approach have coped with the challenges of novelty and cross-agency collaboration. In each of these four projects, we interviewed all of the members of the core project team, focusing on how these individuals shared knowledge and organized their efforts, how they dealt with the multiple types of expertise engaged in the project, and how they engaged the multitude of agencies affiliated with the project.

In examining these four projects we find certain common struggles with novelty and cross-agency cooperation. Each involved a substantial effort at pulling in a loose array of agencies during the conceptual period, and then struggled to get buy in at implementation. We derive seven lessons from their experiences as to how to manage first, a conceptual process which pulls in the visions and knowledge of the many actors that need to be involved in digital government, and second, an implementation process that successfully garners the necessary participation of relevant state and local agencies.

Lessons for Managing E-Government Projects Successfully

1. Getting started: Bring lots of people to the table.

In the conceptual stage, it is important to draw on groups of all possible stakeholders, bringing them together in task forces, focus groups, or work groups. Effective brainstorming requires many perspectives. It also helps break down the silos, by eliminating false perceptions of exceptionalism. This process of inclusiveness also creates a sense of ownership in agencies. By having an open door at the conception phase, it makes the job much easier at the implementation phase.

2. Build a network of discourse.

The brainstorming process is not simply a one-off. It is an ongoing process of building networks that continue to be active between events. In fact, one of the primary goals of events (meetings of workgroups, etc.) should be to nurture the creation and maintenance of informal networks.

3. Don't prematurely eliminate avenues of brainstorming.

It is critical not to prematurely eliminate potential directions of innovation. It is in fact desirable to initially minimize the role of "technical constraints" in the conception phase, because technology is rarely the decisive constraint. The role of IT people should therefore be minimized in the initial discussions.

4. Centralize and decentralize.

There needs to be an appropriate balance of functions performed at the center of the e-government project and at the periphery. The basic IT infrastructure clearly has to be maintained centrally. Further, certain standards need to be set at the center—both to guarantee interoperability, as

well as to eliminate redundant investments. However, centralization of some of the functions of e-government does not mean that all functions of government need to be centralized. These battles over centralization are at the core of all of the implementation issues in e-government. This is, in part, why the conceptual process needs to be inclusive, in order to incorporate the circumstances of all of the key players (see lesson 1).

5. Obtain top-level buy-in.

Centralization must, in part, be an exercise in raw power. Two fundamental sources of power are (1) authority, and (2) funding. It is the ultimate irony that the transformation of government into a networked form requires the support of “old-fashioned” hierarchic structure of the state. The second source of power is money. Tying the adoption of standards to the funding of an agency IT system can prove an effective tool. Funding is both a carrot and a stick, of course, and the potential of e-government projects is to offer agencies the possibility of doing more with the same resources.

However, this recommendation comes with a huge caveat. A pure top-down, power-based strategy is not always an option, is rarely sustainable, by itself would result in “guerilla warfare” resistance to e-government projects in agencies, and does not leverage the knowledge and experiences distributed within government. It is essential to create a sense of ownership at the grassroots.

6. Building grassroots support: Become a knowledge hub.

One of the projects we studied offers important lessons about how create bottom up pressures for change in agencies, where its training center was a critical tool. Clearly, one important barrier to change within agencies is that change, in the short run, is typically costly. The training center thus subsidizes change by providing a requisite resource—knowledge. The training center is more than simply providing subsidy to agencies, however, it is also about managing cultural change. The training center temporarily pulls IT people out of their cultural milieu, offering exposure to new ways of doing business.

Acting as a knowledge hub also implies a continued “listening” to the concerns of people in the agencies, and adapting accordingly. The training center thus plays the role of explaining/training, as well as a mechanism for continued innovation. Both will facilitate adoption of technologies by agencies. The training center thus empowers agents of change within agencies, creating bottom-up pressure for change.

7. Facilitate peer-to-peer exchange among agencies.

Part of the challenge of implementation, as noted repeatedly above, is the silo-based nature of government. As stated above, in the conception phase it is important to create an ongoing dialog among the affected agencies. This process needs to continue in the implementation phase, through actively facilitating exchange among agencies by giving incentives such as shared services, and by helping them partner up with like-minded individuals and agencies.