

New Models of Collaboration for Delivering Government Services

PI: Sharon Dawes, Center for Technology in Government, University at Albany/SUNY

Co-PIs:

Patricia Diamond Fletcher, University of Maryland Baltimore County, Jon Gant, Syracuse University

International Collaborators:

CEFRIQ, Quebec; Lise Prefontaine, University of Quebec at Montreal; Sylvie Nigot, CITA Belgium

The search for more effective methods of delivering public services began in the early 1980s in most industrialized countries. Overall, the trend has been toward reducing the role of the government in public service delivery in certain sectors of activities and encouraging the private or nonprofit sector to play a more important role. In the last decade, both industrialized and developing countries started to seek out new models of collaboration involving multi-government networks or public-private partnerships, often involving innovative use of information technology.

The objective of this multinational research project is to enhance our understanding of multi-organizational collaborations engaged in the delivery of government services to citizens and businesses. The concept of "collaboration" here is a broad one. It includes not only public-private partnerships, but also encompasses situations involving multiple government organizations, and government working with nonprofit organizations. The defining characteristic of these endeavors is the voluntary combination of separate organizations into a coherent service delivery system supported by advanced information technologies. The rapid evolution of these technologies has created important new opportunities for governments to redesign services through creative relationships with other organizations. This research seeks to document and analyze how these collaborations develop and perform in different nations around the world.

This research was designed to understand how these collaborations work and to identify critical barriers, enablers, and results associated with the technologies, processes, and relationships employed across a variety of collaboration models. The study involved a network of field researchers in Canada, the US and Europe who studied more than a dozen collaborations and uncovered critical success factors and lessons learned about these new organizational forms are designed, managed, and perform. Four American, nine Canadian, and two European cases were developed and analyzed using a preliminary models drawn from the research literature of interorganizational networks, management information systems, public management, and organizational behavior. The researchers elaborated the model into a standard protocol to collect and code the data and presented all case studies in a standard format.

The cases fit into a overall national and regional efforts to streamline government and move toward innovative partnership models involving the use of technology deliver of public services. US, Canadian, and European policies share similar goals but differ somewhat in method and extent of implementation. Most of the projects we studied involved the establishment of some kind of e-government initiative. The policy domains and customer or user groups varied widely, but three main service types were addressed: public access to a single service type, public access to multiple services and/or information sources, or support for internal governmental operations

Research results

The study produced a iterative dynamic model in which the political, social, economic and cultural environments, as well as the institutional, business and technical environments exert a pervasive influence on the collaboration projects, their participants, and their performance. The collaboration process itself

influences and is influenced by the players and their expectations, and by the modes and methods of collaboration they choose to use. The collaboration process leads to performance outcomes in terms of both the collaboration itself and the service goals it seeks to meet. These results further influence the players, what tools they choose, and the way they interact. In addition, double-loop learning appears to take place— the participants not only learned better ways to manage these particular projects, they also learned how to approach collaborative working relationships more generally.

The study also showed that cross-cultural public management research is a complex and error-prone endeavor. Conducting a public management research project that involves a collaboration among researchers and sponsors from different countries poses particular challenges. The culturally specific and the universal may be blurred if not enough attention is paid to research design, methodology, and accuracy and equivalence of the key concepts. Without these, the research team is likely to make errors that may affect the validity of the study. The main issues we encountered in our study included non-equivalence of key concepts, cultural stereotypes, assumptions of universality, and difficulties in comparative analysis. To deal effectively with these issues, we have identified crucial questions that need to be addressed in order for the cross-cultural research endeavor to be both reliable and valid. These questions pose themselves at each stage of the research --in the research design, during execution, and in the analysis. They address such pitfalls as the importance of focusing on cultural factors as independent variables, the cultural dynamics of the research team, and the importance of translation and of finding culturally equivalent definitions of key concepts.

Practical results

Our cross-country analysis of the dozen cases included in our research project led us to identify four critical success factors that transcend national boundaries: leadership, trust, risk management, and communication. These elements of project management were crucial in ensuring a smooth development and successful implementation of the collaboration projects. “New Models of Collaboration: A Guide for Managers” presents the case studies, results of an international conference, and comparative essays that draw on specific examples from the cases illustrate the importance of these key management issues. It is available on the CTG Web site at <http://www.ctg.albany.edu/projects/cefrio> .

Publications and presentations

Dawes, S.S. & Prefontaine, L. (2003). Understanding New Models of Collaboration for Delivering Government Services,” Communications of the ACM.

Dawes, S.S. & Eglene, O. (2004). New models of collaboration for delivering government services: A dynamic model drawn from multi-national research. National Digital Government Research Conference (dgo2004).

Dawes, S.S. “New Models of Collaboration” presentation and panel moderator. National Conference of State Legislatures Annual Conference, July 2003.

Fletcher, P.D., Dawes, S.S. and Prefontaine. L. “The Power of Partnerships: New Models of Collaboration.” American Society for Public Administration Annual Conference, April 2003.