

While e-government offers local governments another way to serve citizens and bring innovation to internal operations, it's not easy to bring about this change. Information technology may provide alternative methods for service delivery and government operations, but it requires figuring out what makes sense to do within your local government given your constituents, your staff, your resources, and your priorities. It also requires reassessing current business processes and functions in your government.

The overriding question for local governments, then, is "if e-government is difficult, why should we do it?" We posed this question to the clerks, mayors, supervisors, and council members who participated in workshops and interviews. Here are some of the benefits they are realizing.

Increasing efficiency by streamlining business processes

Implementing an information technology system can reduce the number of steps in routine business processes and automate functions that were once manual. One county clerk said that a new optical imaging system reduced the number of times deed and mortgage documents are handled from 16 to 4. It saved time and effort, and reduced the tension around the office that came from so much routing and re-routing of paperwork.

Improving internal communication

Using technology to communicate within local governments can make it easier to keep up with what's going on in each department and program. Department heads can keep executives up-to-date with regular e-mail. Documents can be distributed and approved electronically rather than printed and reviewed on paper. Communicating electronically enables staff to readily share information that can inform decision making.

Providing better customer service

Technology can improve the way that local government serves constituents. Offering self-service access to information through the Internet is one way to improve service. Technologies, such as automated telephone systems and the Internet provide information to citizens even when local government offices are not open. E-government can also improve citizen service by providing automated responses to permit applications and requests for information. Streamlining business processes and improving the flow of internal communication saves staff time and energy so they can provide better services to constituents who call or come in for information.

Keeping up with citizen demands and expectations

Society is moving toward a more electronic way of life. More and more businesses and citizens are working electronically. It's only a matter of time until they expect the same from local governments. When neighboring governments offer electronic services, citizens and businesses will notice and begin asking why their government isn't doing the same.

Promoting what you do well

Offering an array of electronic information and services can help attract new residents and businesses looking for a progressive and forward-thinking community. E-government provides a direct medium - besides newspapers, radio, and television - for promoting government work. This is particularly beneficial for suburban governments like Westchester County whose news stories are often overshadowed or ignored by the large media outlets that focus on metropolitan areas.