

Pioneers share words of wisdom for those starting their own e-government projects.

Get buy in from the people who can stop you

In every local government a handful of influential people have the power to stop and start a project. It's important to get support from these people right from the start. If you can't get them at the planning table, find a way to capture and respond to their feedback and ideas. Once they are on board, keep them in the loop through regular status reports. Failure to do so could derail the project at the first sign of trouble. In one town, the clerk wanted to put the town's codebook online. The trouble was the IT director was initially against it because he thought it would be too much work for his department. Rather than giving up on the idea, the clerk successfully took the IT director's concerns into consideration and researched the workload involved in such a project. She then presented the potential benefits and an estimation of workload to both the town supervisor and IT director. Through this discussion both the IT director and the town supervisor saw the advantages of being able to update and provide access to the codebook electronically.

Deal with the cyclical life of local government

With elections every couple of years, change is a way of life in local government. New executives bring in new administrations, new clerks bring in new processes, and new legislators bring in new priorities. Yet even with these continual changes, many officials stay in their positions for years. This may pose a problem, or an opportunity, for innovation. One new supervisor saw opportunity when she came into office. The town had no network, e-mail, or Internet access. Her predecessor had been in office for a decade but had not been interested in technology. The new supervisor's first technology priority was to install a network and an internal e-mail system to link town departments. The change in administration as the catalyst for these fundamental changes in the way the town works.

Prepare to overcome or wait out resistance

Many people don't want to change the way they do things, regardless of their position or age. Information technology can be intimidating for those who are unfamiliar with it. Recognizing this possibility and making plans to address it can help turn people around. For example, one clerk who wanted to use technology to update the town's financial system had a hard time working with the treasurer to get funds allocated for new computers and software. The treasurer was against the idea of computers and blocked attempts to fund IT projects. Given that the treasurer was near retirement, the clerk waited until the treasurer retired, then led the computerization of the whole system.

Prepare for ongoing education and training

Changing processes and introducing information technology require an ongoing commitment to training and education. Most local governments have small staffs and if only one person knows how to use a technology, then work can't be done when they leave or are out of the office. One village deputy mayor saw how excited everyone was when the village Web site was launched two years ago. But just one year later, the person who designed and maintained it left and the site was quickly out of date. To avoid further problems related to skills being in the hands of only one person, the village decided to train not only the new employee but also another staff member.

Sometimes you just have to do it

There may never be a right time for an e-government project, so start small, go slowly, and learn as you go. Find a real need, identify possible solutions, call other local governments, find pockets of money wherever you can, and foster creative partnerships. One town clerk started with a Web site to provide consistent and timely redistricting information. The town supervisor and town board found small amounts of money to fund the site, which enabled constituents to type in their addresses to find their election districts and polling places. During this project, town officials learned how technology can improve operations and have since implemented new management software as well as an electronic records indexing system.