

From “Need to Know” to “Need to Share”: Tangled Problems, Information Boundaries, and the Building of Public Sector Knowledge Networks

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Public Administrative Review's Theory to Practice features exchanges among scholars and practitioners assessing what prominent theories and research in their areas of expertise have to say about the challenges, choices, and opportunities facing public administration today. This article summarizes 15 years of CTG research into the challenges of cross-boundary knowledge and information sharing in government.

Public managers confront tangled problems every day across all policy domains and levels of government, and they need to be ready to deal with them through networked forms of engagement and action. Knowledge networking—the ability to create public sector knowledge networks (PSKNs) suitable for addressing these problems—requires a certain set of skills and attitudes, as well as interpersonal and other kinds of trust. Network development processes that emphasize early, open dialogue and examination of assumptions and expectations do better than those that rush forward with a fixed IT solution in mind. Those that adapt and learn from experience are more likely to succeed in achieving their substantive project and networking goals. Finally, to be sustainable as organizational forms, knowledge networks need some legal foundation, access to resources, supportive policies, and innovative forms of leadership.

Sharing and integrating knowledge and information in multiorganizational settings clearly involves complex socio-technical interactions embodied in work processes, organizational forms, and institutional contexts. These are challenges of governance as well as issues for administration. They have implications for efficiency, performance, and public value that are ripe for multidisciplinary investigation, as well as for usefully linking research and practice. The challenge to public managers is to build institutional, managerial, and professional capabilities to engage cross-boundary, knowledge-intensive problems whenever they appear.

An expanded version of this article, along with commentary and an opportunity to contribute to the online discussion, can be found on the PAR Web site.