

The Partnership

FirstGov is a unique example of a public-private partnership among the U.S. General Services Administration, the Federal Chief Information Officers Council, Vice-President Gore's National Partnership for Reinventing Government, the Government Information Technology Services Board, private sector information industry companies, and the Fed-Search Foundation created by Dr. Eric Brewer, Chief Scientist at Inktomi. It was Dr. Brewer's donation of the Inktomi search engine, for a three year period, which was vital in getting FirstGov.gov up and running in a very short timeframe. It is interesting to note here that this same donation was the cause of considerable angst in the software industry, which feared that when the three year donation period was over, Inktomi would have an unfair competitive advantage over other potential vendors vying for the contract. FirstGov.gov must pay for search engine services beginning August, 2003.

Objectives and Motives of Partners

While President Clinton provided the impetus for FirstGov.gov, he was not a partner in the working sense of the word. His policy endorsement and championship of this project enabled the partnerships to occur.

Dr. Brewer, the impetus behind the search engine donation by Inktomi, said that his involvement began when he attended World Economic Forum in January of 2000. He was able to meet President Clinton at a reception held afterwards where he offered his search engine as a gift. He also told Clinton that project could be implemented within one year. Brewer, a recipient of graduate school funding for his early research in parallel computing, from the Department of Defense, saw his contribution as a way to return the favor. He considered FirstGov.gov a worthy and worthwhile project.

The U.S. General Services Administration was a key partner to the development process. They provided the wherewithal, the organizational resources, and a good number of the people to work on FirstGov.gov. The team was created to be a collateral model of the organization, one that could use the resources of the larger agency, but operate outside the rules when needed. Thus, team expertise and enthusiasm was not hampered by the red tape of bureaucracy. The then CIO at the GSA was credited with being a driving force behind the project. He was referred to as an advocate, a proselytizer, and a very visible champion for FirstGov.gov throughout the development and implementation.

The Federal Chief Information Officers Council was also a partner to this venture. They were a source of knowledge and expertise on government agencies and information technology. They also served to enable the cross-agency approach to information presentation and dissemination - a vital characteristic of the FirstGov.gov portal. Finally, they also assisted in the first year funding of the project, by literally passing the hat among 22 federal agencies to keep the project alive.

Ultimately, FirstGov.gov saw its partnerships expanding to all branches of the federal government, as well as to state and local governments. Involvement with the National Association of State CIO's was critical to getting the buy-in of the states. Other partners included the National Partnership for Reinventing Government and the Government Information Technology Services Board

Today, the Office of FirstGov sits within the General Services Administration's Office of Government-wide Policy.

Characteristics of the Partners

Everyone involved in the development and implementation of FirstGov.gov expressed a sense of dedication to and belief in what they were doing. The sense of importance, high level commitment, and urgency was transmitted through all the partners, who pulled together to make the project a success. This was not a typical government project, mired in procurement and acquisition regulations, and constrained by the federal budget. It was much more like that of a start-up "dot.com" fueled by the energy and engagement of its members, and their belief in the project.

It was also seen as a necessary public service. The strong information policies of the federal government focused on information creation, dissemination, and records management and archiving. The creation of a government-wide portal was but one next step in the move to an electronic government.