

The Collaboration Process

As noted above, this project was created, developed and implemented in about nine months. While the climate was right for such a venture, pressure was very intense due to the compressed time line. The collaborators "fell in place" as the project commenced. Brewer's donation of the search engine, while controversial in the software industry, removed one of the main barriers to project development. The project team needed to neither find the funding for such a high ticket tool, nor did they need to invent their own. The General Services Administration had the staff and the organization to contribute to the project which substantively enhanced the resources. The CIO Council supported the development and were successful, in varying degrees to getting the federal agencies' web sites "cleaned up" and ready to be online by September 22, 2000.

One of the partners noted an incident that occurred right before the scheduled public launch of the portal. Content and software problems were discovered which could mean that the launch date would have to be postponed-a situation that no one in the project wanted to occur. Over a weekend period, people at the GSA and other vendors involved in the development were able to find, contact, and transport the relevant personnel to fix the problem; a complex and labor intensive incident which ended well. It was just not an option to any of the partners that FirstGov.gov would not launch on time.

Critical Success Factors of Collaboration Project

Leadership was from the very top, President Clinton. He, and Vice-President Gore were both champions for using information technology to enable better, smarter, faster government services and information dissemination. The management of the project, in the hands of the U.S. General Services Administration, was a facilitating factor in the project's perceived success. The GSA team members were tirelessly dedicated to the project because "they knew it was right." And many saw the small size of the team as a success factor. The size enabled it to be fast and flexible. All the people interviewed credited the success to:

- The President's Memo of December 17, 1999 on "Electronic Government;
- The passage of the Government Paperwork Elimination Act in 1998;
- The donation of the Inktomi search engine for a three year period;
- The small size of the project team; and
- The compressed time frame-90 days-in which to develop and implement FirstGov.gov.

These factors created the top level support, the legislative framework, and the sense of commitment and urgency to have a successful launch date. A general theme heard echoed among the respondents was that FirstGov.gov was successful because of personality, commitment, and a good team.

Governance Model

One of the main sources of contention with the FirstGov.gov project was the nature of the involvement of the software industry. In essence, with the Inktomi donation, the other vendors were initially locked out of competing for this major government procurement. According to members of the software industry the project was naïve and ill-conceived. They felt it was not a successful implementation because it was rushed and not well thought out. They also asserted that by not including the software industry as a whole in this venture, critical intelligence and expertise was lost, leading to a flawed product.

A watchdog organization also felt that the speed was a drawback to the project. It was done without forethought to thinking through the policy implications and needs, according to the OMB Watch. A caution was expressed that policy needs to be in place to insure that information remains in the public domain and does not intentionally or inadvertently become the property of a private sector vendor. They also disagreed with the procurement method, i.e., the acceptance of the donated search engine. This forced federal agencies to use one portal model, regardless of whether or not it was the right model.

The above two instances point to concerns groups' had over the administration and management of the project and the policy environment. In this respect, governance was seen as problematic.

With the current appointment of a Director of Electronic Government in the Executive Office of Management and Budget, FirstGov.gov will have a more structured and accountable governance in the future. While this Director doesn't run the FirstGov.gov program, he is integrally involved in its activities and future developments. The results of the Quicksilver Task Force also put FirstGov.gov in a more formal government-wide context. The attention and oversight of the Federal CIO Council also give it more rigor and made it open to Council

involvement and planning.
