

# Performance

The project was launched in 1996 but the municipalities have only been involved since November 2000. Evaluation of the results must take into consideration the fact that the project is still emerging, which is tiresome for some of the original partners who compare what the OSBR has done to other electronic services that have developed much faster.

## Advantages

There is one important advantage for municipalities. Although municipal registration has always been mandatory, municipalities lacked means of ensuring that new businesses obtained a municipal permit. Registration at the kiosks, which are often located in municipal offices, makes the registration more automatic. The registration ensures better compliance with bylaws on zoning, license fees etc.

For the ministries involved in the collaboration, process facilitation has had a variety of effects. For one, it meant less clerical staff; for another, it served to improve services for the public. The latter case is interesting. The manager spoken to feels that the progress made possible by OSBR and other similar initiatives has made it possible to use the same personnel as before to provide much better service. In his view, because of a shortage of personnel, the service provided for the public in the past was very poor. It is now good. For everyone, the forms are filled out better than in the past. For front-line personnel, OSBR has made their jobs easier.

For the government as a whole, the project led to substantial savings in costs. For politicians in general, making economic development and business creation easier has been a very positive topic at both the municipal and provincial level. Gaining political support for this project was easy.

One benefit of the program is its motivational effect on many employees who see their province at the forefront. For this motivation to persist, the leadership has to remain a fact. The Ministry in charge is continuing to monitor progress in other provinces and some American states to keep track of developments with comparable projects.

## Disadvantages

At the time of the interviews, OSBR's technological development was still relatively limited. The Internet connections in some cases do little more than produce soft copies of faxes. Computer system integration is underway.

The big problem remains the different levels of preparation for change that the various government organizations involved in the project reached. One interview subject mentioned the propensity for risk, which varies considerably from one organization to the next. The different organizational cultures at the agencies involved have been a source of friction throughout the project.

Some people welcome the project. This applies to the numerous users, who consider having the kiosk a blessing compared to the hoops they had to jump through in the past. Yet not everyone feels the same level of comfort with technology and a number of people do not like using a computer.

Also worth repeating among the disadvantages is that the project has always been viewed as marginal because none of the partners spent any money on it or made it a priority. One might add that the venture suffered from having remained a pilot project for such a long time. A great deal still remains to be done to meet the expectations expressed in the PAIC survey.

One problem at the beginning was employee concern about the job cutbacks that OSBR would endender. But this never happened. Another problem for front-line personnel was receiving the proper training, but this is no longer the case.

## Results

Officially, the time required to launch a new business has been cut from six to eight weeks to under a week or two. In practice, as mentioned earlier, someone who turns up in the morning to register a business name can now have that settled within a few hours and answer the OSBR questions in 20 to 40 minutes later that day. The documents are then sent to the government organizations concerned.

OSBR reached its goal of 1,000 applications a month in March 2000. By January 5, 2001, 21,378 clients had used the system and filled out 56,169 applications. The system's popularity makes future development easier in that its current success is attracting the attention of other government agencies, according to the Ministry of Small

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Business.

Some 20 municipalities were participating in OSBR in spring 2001, and 43 by fall 2001. It is estimated that 150 towns could join the system in the near future.

At the end of the required forms is a satisfaction survey that 80% of users fill out. Among this 80%, 96% said they would use the system again or recommend it, and 76% rated the system as excellent or very good. The responses indicate that people consider the system easy to use, simple, and a good use of public funds. It is interesting to note that the user satisfaction rate varies tremendously with the kiosk used to fill out the forms. This factor leads one to believe that satisfaction fluctuates with the amount of on-site support. For those helping users, OSBR is an excellent program that improves the quality of public service. The system's response time could apparently be improved.

It is felt that OSBR has reduced operating costs, and improved the accuracy of the information obtained as well as its legibility. Forms are also filled out better and there is a better flow of information between government agencies. One major advance is that the requirements for registering a business have become much clearer for the public concerned.

## Future of the Program

The plan is to open more kiosks, triple the number of municipalities involved from 20 to over 60 in 2001, and introduce electronic payment with credit cards. Moreover, it is hoped that not only registration but incorporation will become possible. Work is also being done on making business registration in British Columbia possible from locations outside the Province, which should be easy with the Internet. There is also a plan to use XML and enable payments through the Internet with a credit card. This change, on which the project's management team is working, requires a legislative amendment on electronic signatures that is slow in coming.

The system's real growth depends on the number of government registration services that can be added. This is what OSBR's business plan calls for. There is already a pilot project along these lines: *Victoria Connects*, which provides information about a variety of export services, government services, various payment services, advisory services, as well as OSBR. It is the high-tech version of the government agent services we described earlier in an urban setting. The current kiosks, the built-in survey and the efforts made to improve the original system will enable creation of a website where businesses can register directly

The immediate change hoped for is to have an integrated change-of-address system in British Columbia. Apart from address-change unification, the other foreseeable development is the creation of a single business number. The problem of the business name search (the first step before registration) remains to be solved.

OSBR was not designed to be solely a government operation. The location of kiosks on Chamber of Commerce or Community Futures premises has improved integration between the nonprofit organizations and government offices. Eventually, the banks that finance new businesses will have to be included. The non-government partners gain more exposure through their involvement.

The new Liberal government has a reputation of being friendlier to the business world than the former NDP regime. Expanding electronic services was one of the planks in their campaign platform. Those who want to see opportunities for small businesses proliferate have reason for high hopes, said one official we met with.

Asked "What comes to mind when you think about this project?" one interview subject replied, "It's cool!" She added, "It's the way of the future!" The technological change that made this project possible is minor, but the partnership it spawned is major. User satisfaction is also high. The technology can be improved and actually make this project the future of public service delivery for governments that lack the means to do so otherwise and with horizontal issues to deal with. OSBR is a step in the right direction, namely towards improving the government services offered to the public.