

The Service Canada Initiative

Mandate

The Service Canada Initiative had a clear mandate: first, to prepare a development plan, then to implement the solutions proposed in the approved plan and, finally, to evaluate the experience. Remember that the SCI aimed to change the government's image by providing citizens with one-stop access to government services in a swift, reliable, accessible and less expensive manner, and that the project was at the experimental stage. The objective therefore was to establish and assess various innovative models for service delivery that subsequently could be extended to a region, group or all Canadians.

Five principles guided the work of the TBS working group to whom the mandate was assigned: 1) meet citizen needs and continuously improve service delivery; 2) integrate services through a one-stop centre; 3) offer a selection of other means of accessing the services; 4) support the transition to on-line service delivery; and 5) ensure the federal government's visibility and presence in every region of the country.

A staff of about 20 was promptly assembled. Following the situation analysis, they designed an integrated service model (see Figure 1). The plan called for one service offered in three ways: by phone through the 1-800 O-Canada call centre; electronically through the Government of Canada website; and in person at access centres such as those already set up by HRDC, Canada Post and Canadian Heritage, for example. To facilitate access, services and programs are organized by clientele, special needs or concerns such as youth, seniors, hunting and fishing, lost wallets etc. Lastly, the focus was on integrating existing services rather than developing new ones, and this integration was to be achieved primarily through horizontal interdepartmental and interagency cooperation.

The proposal was quickly approved and the plan moved into the second phase of setting up a pilot project. This pilot project aimed at laying the groundwork for an integrated service network was allocated a \$13-million budget for fiscal 1999-2000. It was innovative in the sense that it proposed the development and integration of several delivery models instead of just one. For example, an agreement was signed with HRDC to add a government information dimension to the employment-related access centres it was already operating by means of additional personnel that would guide and assist citizens seeking information. Appendix 1 briefly describes the experiment of this nature carried out in Saguenay/Lac St-Jean. In Manitoba, six community centres were created through a partnership with the Government of Manitoba, Canadian Heritage, and a few municipalities and community organizations. Here too the formula was unique. These centres offer a range of services for Francophone communities locally in a wide range of fields such as health, culture, education, recreation, employment and local development. This project is described in Appendix 2. In New Brunswick, service centres run jointly with the province provide information for both levels of government. Another innovative model was the Café Jeunesse that opened in Montreal. Some 15 departments teamed up with HRDC to operate the Internet café, which provides access to various information services for youth in a variety of areas such as health, employment, education and sports. Guides assist the youth in their search for information. Appendix 3 briefly describes this service delivery model.

Source: Service Canada – Strategic Business Plan 1999-2000, p. 11.

Figure 1 Service Canada Delivery Model

Deliverables and Management Structure

Since the project was considered exploratory, the stages were brief and the deliverables clearly defined. Project management was the responsibility of the TBS Assistant Secretary, Service and Innovation. Those efforts were supported by the approximately 20-member SCI staff, and two committees, one for coordination and the other advisory. The Service Canada Coordination Committee was made up of representatives from 15 departments and handled strategic management, coordination, pilot project selection and evaluation, and communication. The Committee met at regular intervals, namely about four times a year. Service and Innovation also relied on the Advisory Committee on Service Improvement, a working group whose main concern was the offer of government services. This group was further backed by a forum of civil servants with a special interest in the delivery of public services. Alongside these committees were the federal councils that coordinate the regional activities of departments and agencies. They are made up of senior officials, generally Deputy Ministers or Regional Directors, representing each department active in the region. The councils, which were already in place when the SCI project got underway, focus on the regional characteristics of the areas they serve and try to orient federal policies and programs for the welfare of the community. In the case of the community centres for Manitoba's

francophone communities described above, the Federal Council played a leading role in bringing some departments on board.

Achievement of the Integration Contract

The timeframe was short — scarcely two years — and there were big problems. At the outset, two major challenges were identified. Both were related to the culture prevalent within the government. First was the concept of "One size fits all". Team members were convinced that a universal solution would be incapable of meeting the needs of all Canadians, even though they knew some countries such as Australia had successfully adopted that approach. In their view, the nature of the geographic, linguistic and cultural differences in Canada made it necessary to offer integrated yet customized service that takes into account the specific needs of all Canadians, particularly those in outlying and rural areas. The team's second challenge was convincing the various departments and agencies to work together. The idea of integrated government services was alien to the idea held by numerous departments and agencies that their services belonged to them, that they could manage them in keeping with their specific needs and that they did not have to submit to common rules. Also, some departments had developed an internal culture focused on services for citizens while others had done little along these lines.

It was not a matter of creating a new program for service delivery, but rather of exploring ways of developing existing structures into a new approach. Even with its very broad mandate, the project team was small and its resources limited; the project did not have a very high profile, particularly politically, which hampered it somewhat. While some partners wanted a precise, firm orientation, the project team defined itself more as a support group, and sought to stimulate rather than initiate projects. The pilot project took the form of a request to all. Diversity and personalized responses were encouraged. But this broad leeway given to the partners complicated matters slightly because the partners were looking for a clearly defined direction and more precise objectives. Service Canada was acting somewhat like a franchiser with its partners: it set the standards (accessibility, bilingualism, security) while making the partners responsible for service delivery. The result was a certain degree of dissociation between strategy and operations.

Despite the odd misunderstanding and inconsistency, the project quickly won the approval of numerous backers; they liked the idea of customized services and many regions across Canada viewed it as a genuine effort by Ottawa to get closer to the people and meet their specific needs. In scarcely two years, the team developed the integration concept and actively participated in establishing 122 access centres across the country. It did this by negotiating and signing 21 memoranda of understanding (MOU) with 13 federal partners. The Government of Canada website was completely reorganized and provided support for the information officers in access centres as well as people accessing it directly. Lastly, the group convinced Public Works to redesign its database for the 1-800 service and make it accessible to non-government personnel working in the access centres.

Technology

Technology played an important role in this project by providing an infrastructure for remote access at little cost to the taxpayer. Moreover, it provided very efficient support for the personnel responsible for providing information in person at the various access centres. In fact, these employees often find the information and support they need at the Canadian government's website, newly organized by subject area.

But it was not all high-tech, especially when it came to integrating the various call centres. In fact, the 1-800 basic service provides front-line information, but if someone needs specialized information, calls cannot be transferred to the appropriate department with the existing infrastructures. Although the technology is there, the costs are exorbitant. At the website, the development of electronic forms also proved problematic because it took longer than expected and because of the transactional security difficulties that arose. Telephone support for citizens accessing the government website also ran into problems even though the project provided voice support for lost visitors. Lastly, remote access from very distant regions was often completely missing or highly costly. Even where Internet access was available, not everyone could use it for lack of computer literacy. And when services are available, they are all too often piecemeal with little integration. It should be noted, however, that these problems are endemic to all efforts to develop service portals and not just to the project under discussion.