

Introduction

Worldwide executives and managers of public organizations who aspire to improve the quality of government services are increasingly deploying E-government strategies that involve collaborations among government agencies, businesses, and non-governmental organizations. Our multinational research study "New Models of Collaboration for Delivering Government Services" examined various partnerships in place around the world where government organizations form cooperative alliances with other organizations to support the design, implementation, operation and maintenance of E-government services. By collaborating, these public organizations build partner-based outsourcing relationships with service providers. As partners they share risks, obtain access to new markets and technologies, speed products and services to market, and pool complementary skills (Auster, 1994; Powell, Koput, and Smith-Doerr, 1996). This approach gives government organizations a flexible partnership with their service providers that helps both sides work together to overcome many of the limitations inherent in building a complex system under a contractual agreement (Lee et. al., 2003). Through our case studies, we learned that a high level of information sharing, good communication and well-orchestrated coordination are necessary to success. In most of the cases, we gained insight from collaborations that are evolving from a typical arms-length contractual relationship to a highly-integrative partner-based outsourcing relationship. In this essay, we examine how the ability of a public organization to work integratively with its partners influences the extent to which the government managers and executives can reposition their services around an E-government agenda.

Many of the executives and managers we interviewed lament the challenge of E-government and worry that they simply may have limited capabilities in-house to develop or adopt innovative approaches quickly for delivering government services online. E-government systems consist of complex process innovations and reengineering strategies that rely heavily on the systematic integration of old and new information and communication technology components with critical functions of the service delivery system.

E-government systems also involve some level of coordination and communication with almost every functional unit of the organization, where working relationships among employees are constrained by new and old business processes, and layers of complex institutional and organizational policies, practices, and norms. For many government agencies, the pool of employees with the requisite information technology skills is small. Veteran employees have mainframe and PC-era skills and lack such internet-era skills as managing and developing client-server software-based solutions.

And it is difficult for managers to overcome the growing wage gap between public and private sector IT employees. For example, the managers from British Columbia's OneStop Business Registration noted that government policy mandates that government agencies acquire information technology services from the private sector in a move to avoid hiring full-time personnel whose jobs might become obsolete as technologies evolve or to avoid competing with the high-tech salaries of the private-sector. Consequently, as many managers we interviewed conclude, implementing E-government is as much about the technology as it is about dealing with inertia of existing business processes and pushing against the weight of a bureaucratic organization.

However, many public organizations turn to collaborations to capture the expertise needed for dealing with the challenges of designing, implementing and operating E-government systems. The City of Bremen, Germany, for example, operates its Bremen Online Service through a partnership venture with Deutsche Telekom, Sparkasse Bremen (a local bank), and several private local information technology companies. Rather than operating alone, the City of Bremen turned to these private sector partners so that the city would quickly gain technical expertise and speed up the development of its online services. The partnership also evolved into a highly integrative relationship as the boundaries between the City of Bremen and its private sector partners are blurring. The public and private partners are sharing risks and rewards, their employees are working seamlessly together, and their employees are also co-developing and exchanging ideas and knowledge and learning through joint problem-solving activities.

The likelihood that a government organization will find success in its E-government strategy depends on how well its managers can leverage its technology, organizational, and human resources in coordination with its collaborating partners. These collaborations require employees of all of the partners to work in a highly coordinated fashion. For this to happen, the partnering organizations must provide the motive, opportunity and structure.

Relationships among employees in an organization are a critical source of performance. They provide the infrastructure for creating organizational knowledge. Researchers have concluded that "organizations function courtesy of a social network of employees giving, hoarding, influencing or accumulating information" (Hildebrand 1998, p. 1). Underlying the formal organization chart of a company is a thriving, complex, and dynamic world of informal employee relationships that serve as the infrastructure through which information and knowledge flow to all parts of each partnering organization. From this network sprout the innovations that will produce the next

design for a web-portal interface, the problem-solving solutions that will enhance integration of a legacy database with a data warehouse, or the incremental improvements that will fine-tune the performance of the E-government system. Simply stated, the working knowledge necessary to achieve these goals lies in the relationships among employees of the collaborators.

Through our case studies, we found that public organizations are taking several approaches to ensure a high-level of communication and coordination among the employees of the collaborating partners.