

Formal Structure Needs to Support Informal Structures

While the IRS modernization plan uses a top-down approach to formally govern its partnership with the E-File service providers, other collaborations flourish through the informal grass-root level relationships of employees involved in the collaboration. Although defining the formal structure of the collaboration is still important, it is also critical to let the informal network evolve. As Krackhardt and Hanson (1993) argue, "these informal networks can cut through the formal reporting procedures to jump start stalled initiatives and meet extraordinary deadlines" (p. 104). Employees in the collaboration need the opportunity, resources, and discretion to access colleagues who can help them complete their work.

Architects of the New York State GIS Clearinghouse, for example, relied on an informal network of employees to get the project off the ground and successfully implemented. The New York State Geographic Information Systems Coordination Program developed an innovative model building a statewide spatial data infrastructure and relied on both formal and informal mechanisms to stimulate information sharing, communication, and coordination. The project was formally governed through a multi-agency Coordinating Body with work groups responsible for such areas as education and data standards, plus three advisory committees representing local and state government and the private sector.

As described in the case, the informal networks among employees were critical for the success of the initiative.

- "As experts met regularly, personal relationships were forged and trust developed. It became clear to the community of practice that none of their goals would materialize unless they cooperated in both formal and informal ways to make significant progress. As they developed trust and respect as individuals, collaboration became easier. The ability of the participants to put aside individual goals or predisposition for the good of the whole effort has been a major characteristic of the work groups".
- "Some of the most effective instruments of the Coordination Program were developed very informally due to the synergy in the work groups. For example, the Legal Working Group was one of the first to be established. About 10 people participated from the public and nonprofit sectors. Its first focus was on the idea of data licensing agreements. One member drafted three different agreements: a state-state license, a state-local license, and a state-private license. After discussing these, it seemed to the group that many one-to-one custom agreements would be needed. Another member suggested the possibility of one standard agreement for "people who want to be inside the circle." It was an insightful moment and led the group quickly to develop the basic outlines of the Data Sharing Cooperative.