

The concepts and challenges of organizational networks are important to understanding the operation of public sector and the performance and prospects for e-government. Network concepts have a fairly long history in public affairs scholarship. In political science, interorganizational policy networks have long been recognized as an important feature of political influence and action (Laumann & Knoke, 1987; Raab, 2002). The main purpose of these networks is to exert influence on the political process in order to shape policy and resource allocation decisions that affect various constituencies. Policy networks are usually informal; they have no fixed organizational or management structure. In this respect they are unlike most other notions of network. However, they are a form of collective action, designed to influence any number of policy concerns. Regulation of the financial services industry, rules for the use of public lands, mechanisms for school choice, or protection of personal privacy in health care are just a few of the hundreds of concerns that give rise to policy networks.

Service delivery networks are a common method for implementing public policies, whether through traditional intergovernmental arrangements, or through networks of nonprofit (or even for profit) service providers linked by contract to a government agency (Provan and Milward, 1995). In these networks, the main purpose is to deliver specific services to a client population with high quality and reasonable cost. Many publicly-funded human services, such as mental health services, day care, and employment readiness training use this network service delivery model. Service delivery networks are the most widely recognized and most studied form of public sector network. They have been devised to achieve broad geographic coverage, economy, and flexibility in service systems.

The growth of service delivery networks has given rise to an important public administration research agenda. Key questions of public network management parallel the elements of traditional administrative theory (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001): What are the main functions of public network management? What group processes support network functions? How do networks provide flexibility and resilience? Can mutual responsibility substitute for traditional notions of accountability? What kind of cohesion holds networks together in the absence of a legal charter? How does organizational power play out in network relationships? Do public management networks produce results or discoveries that traditional forms of management cannot produce?

In terms of practice, O'Toole (1997) argues that practitioners need to take networks more seriously and incorporate network concepts into the fabric of contemporary administration. Network thinking and action are necessary to address the demands of the increasing number of "wicked problems" (Rittel and Webber, 1973) that confront the public sector. These are the problems that cannot be divided into logical parts, assigned to suitably expert organizations, and brought back together into a comprehensive solution. Wicked problems are more organic; they have multiple causes and interacting effects that do not lend themselves to traditional division-of-labor approaches. Welfare reform, achieving high quality and affordable health care, and protection of the environment all present ample examples of wicked problems. Network forms of organization are increasingly needed for other reasons. One is a growing public desire for government to set broad action agendas, but to leave the implementation to others (the well-known "steering, but not rowing" metaphor of Reinventing Government (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992)). Political demands for broad inclusion in decision making and implementation favor networked forms of governance. Layers of overlapping mandates almost guarantee unexpected, even perverse, outcomes unless administrators learn to recognize and deal with a cross-cutting network of requirements and actors.

Information, of course, is crucial to the foregoing concepts of public sector networks. Information is essential to the policy network where members try to influence decision makers with data, analysis, and stories that favor one position or another. In service delivery networks, information must flow among the various organizations in order to support and document the service delivery process. However, organizational networks whose **purpose** is knowledge and information sharing have emerged mostly with the growth and adoption of advanced networking technologies and the development of e-government. These have not been extensively studied. Examples of such networks include the growing number of state and national efforts to share geographic information, such as the National Spatial Data Infrastructure (NSDI) initiative in the US federal government. Other efforts support communities of practice with information systems, communication tools, and data resources that improve professional practice. Such networks also gather, analyze, and share information about program performance among participating agencies in such fields as human services, or to establish monitoring and communications functions for public health, government financial management, and national security. These divergent domains of public interest are all served by an increasingly important form of organization: the public sector knowledge network (PSKN), which can be defined as **a combination of interorganizational relationships, policies, information content, professional knowledge, work processes, and technologies brought together to achieve a collective public purpose**. These purposes, as illustrated above, include cross-program coordination, cross-functional collaboration, and creation and use of shared repositories of detailed information.

The next section reviews the research literature of interorganizational networks focusing on the ways in which good performance (or measures of success) are characterized. The succeeding section identifies critical success factors (or conditions for success) also present in the literature. These two literatures are then combined to offer a typology of PSKN success that has utility for both further research and the practical design and management of such networks.