

New Models of Collaboration *A Guide for Managers*

Partners in Change

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Abstract

As part of the research endeavor “New Models of Collaboration for Delivering Public Services,” selected projects were studied to analyze the cooperation model adopted, management practices used, and key success factors. The “Partners in Change” project, initiated in 1994 by the Department of Human Resources Development of the New Brunswick Government, is one of the innovative projects chosen for this study. This report describes the social services delivery reengineering project realized in partnership with the private firm Anderson Consulting (now Accenture). The case study was conducted and written in 2001 by Paule Laberge, Ph.D., from the University of New Brunswick in Saint-John for PIVOT.¹

Project Background

Political, Economic and Cultural Environment

In 1995 the McKenna Liberal government was engaged in a restructuring of New Brunswick’s economy embarked upon eight years earlier. A series of initiatives was aimed at eliminating the Province’s budget deficits and reducing its debt, then approaching \$6 billion.

The situation facing the Department of Income Assistance (later to become the Department of Human Resources Development, HRD-NB) reflected general economic conditions in the Province. With an annual budget of \$285.7 million, the Department was running a deficit of approximately \$40 million a year before the project. At the time it also faced a series of chronic problems: outdated work methods, steady increase in the number of income assistance cases, overworked employees, and obsolete technology. Employees found it increasingly difficult to meet the needs of clients, whom the system kept in a state of psychological and economic dependence, in due time. Lastly, public opinion complained about the escalating costs and tax burden of social assistance.

Institutional and Strategic Environment

Realizing the problems they faced, senior Department officials decided to take remedial action. In 1992 the Department developed a strategic plan whose objectives were to improve services, devote more time to clients, and curb administrative costs. These goals were expressed in terms of turning around the 30:70 ratio (Department personnel spent 30% of their time on meetings with clients and 70% on administrative tasks), with the aim being to devote 70% of time to clients.

In this context, a number of new programs were launched: “Early Childhood Initiatives” in association with the Department of Health and Community Services, which made younger children and their families a priority; “New Brunswick Works”, a federal-provincial pilot project, and the “New Brunswick Job Corps” (for the 50-to-65 age group), both in association with the Department of Advanced Education and Labour to facilitate access to the job market for

¹ Research group on the performance and innovation of organizations

some income-assistance beneficiaries. Finally, assistance and benefit services for the mentally or physically handicapped became available through the “Training and Employment Support Services” (TESS) program. The purpose of these programs, which averaged three years in length, was to foster the economic and social reintegration of income-assistance beneficiaries who expressed a desire to get out from under their problems and lead more self-reliant lives.

In 1993, the Department also made a number of attempts at internal restructuring including the Quality Work Initiative, a program involving employee suggestions for change, and publication of a working paper entitled “Creating New Options.” The cornerstone of the new policy consisted of education, training social assistance recipients, and changing their environment. But the partial changes introduced within the Department failed to produce the expected results and the government felt the steps required to bring about a major overhaul were progressing too slowly. The Department lacked the financial resources for sweeping change and its personnel did not have the know-how required both to manage a major reorganization and introduce the desired changes. Lastly, it was impossible to recruit a large enough project team internally without jeopardizing other departmental operations.

The following year the Department of Income Assistance became the Department of Human Resources Development (HRD-NB) and began a series of public consultations on the new options proposed in the working paper with that title. A dozen public hearings, individual and group meetings with beneficiaries, discussions with citizens and community groups, as well as client surveys laid the foundation for the new mandate the Government gave HRD-NB: the priorities became client self-reliance, improving social benefits services, and HRD-NB’s fiscal responsibility. The Government gave the new Department four years to attain the objectives in its new mission statement.

HRD-NB had to establish a new service delivery system that would enable social assistance recipients to acquire the skills essential for becoming self-reliant. Only those who were really in need or unable to work (due to age, health, physical or mental handicap) would continue receiving long-term financial assistance. For the others, special measures had to be taken to phase them into the labour market. Young people were obliged to finish high school or undergo job training, live with their family as long as possible, and take parenting courses if they were teenage parents.

Facing a financial impasse, HRD-NB decided to turn to the private sector for the expertise required for its administrative and technological overhaul. It used “common purpose procurement,” which marked one of the first times this tendering process was employed outside the federal government. HRD-NB issued a request for proposals to select a private enterprise that met the following criteria: expertise in managing major projects to transform social services, mastery of advanced technology, and substantial financial means. The Department had no preconceived solution to its problems on which the private firms could bid and estimate costs. HRD-NB had a good idea of what it wanted to undertake and achieve, yet asked the consulting firms to begin by submitting proposals describing solutions and their feasibility.

Project

Choice of Partners

Andersen Consulting Canada was selected from among five firms to develop, in association with HRD-NB, a new model for managing services and a technological system adapted to client needs. For Selection Committee members, there was no question that Andersen Consulting Canada was the firm whose expertise outweighed that of the other candidates. Prior to signing their partnership agreement, HRD-NB and Andersen Consulting developed a project plan whose solutions addressed the Department's specific needs.

Mandate

The totally integrated solution proposed to the Government by Andersen/Accenture in association with HRD-NB covered:

- Project management;
- A definition of work methods;
- The design of applications;
- The development and introduction of services;
- The acquisition of hardware, software, a network and installation services;
- Change management and training services;
- Ongoing support, system maintenance and operation.

Initially, Andersen/Accenture believed they could carry out the project within two years and the project timetable was based on this assessment. The performance-based contract signed by the partners after 14 months of cooperation was unique: the private partner, Andersen/Accenture, agreed to finance the entire cost of the project (\$15.5 million) and financial expenses (\$5.5 million) for a total of \$21 million. The conditions stipulated that the firm's fees (a fixed base price) would only be paid when the savings targeted by the project were achieved (\$85 million). The project costs would be repaid over five years, with the firm's fees deducted from the savings from lower general administrative expenses, the prevention of over-payments, a reduction in the number of eligible applicants, and an increase in the amounts recovered. The firm would only be unconditionally reimbursed for the costs of the computer hardware and software required for the project. The firm faced a serious risk of not earning a profit. Andersen/Accenture normally relies on the earnings generated directly by a project rather than on the probability of longer-term profits. In the event of success, Andersen/Accenture would reap a \$16.5-million profit; otherwise, its loss could reach that amount.

Project Implementation

The transformation of HRD-NB had to produce a new way of delivering services that was adapted to the needs of social assistance beneficiaries and focused on results. The project had to introduce automated work methods, a computerized case management system, and new job definitions. For this to happen, a means of evaluation and supervision had to be introduced to

help case managers in their dealings with clients. With case management, priority is assigned to creating a work plan for each client with personal career and progress goals. The Department had to change from a system that kept clients in a state of dependency to one that encouraged clients to become self-reliant by enabling them to acquire the skills necessary to re-enter the job market.

The transition from a cheque production and delivery system to a case management system meant changing the work involved and how it was done, recycling personnel, and establishing new relations between employees and clients. The project had to develop a computer system based on client needs and named “NB Case”, the only tangible deliverable from the client’s standpoint. In so doing, the project had to change the Department’s focus and work culture. Since the objective was to put clients back into the labour market, clients had to be made to realize that the financial assistance provided by the Department was but one dimension of the social benefits available.

Five key stages of the project emerged, regardless of the specific duties of the teams that may or may not have been involved in each stage: 1) mission statement; 2) business plan; 3) selection, migration and training; 4) pilot project; and 5) province-wide implementation.

1) Mission Statement

First, a new vision of what HRD-NB should become was developed, credit for which went to the Deputy Minister at the time, who worked relentlessly to create an atmosphere of cooperation, produce an inspiring vision, and build a consensus around that vision.

2) Business Plan

The business plan indicated that the Department was overstaffed, that a radical reorganization was essential, and that major savings could be achieved by a new service-delivery system, and not just by reducing the number of social beneficiaries and eliminating fraud.

3) Selection, Migration and Training

The new technology eliminated 125 jobs, but led to the creation of 75 new case management positions. A selection process served to fill the new positions. This was a painful, difficult period that gave rise to considerable uncertainty and anxiety. An employee training and recycling program was established in association with the Université de Moncton and Acadia University.

4) Pilot Project

When the pilot project got underway in Fredericton in October 1997, no one had foreseen the number of bugs that would lock up the system. The situation turned into a nightmare: it took many months of steady work by Andersen/Accenture programmers in association with the test team to complete most of the adjustments and modifications.

5) Province-Wide Implementation

The final key stage of the project was the province-wide introduction of NB Case in October 1998. The quantity and precision of the information collected by the system reinforced the impression HRD-NB personnel had that at least they knew what was happening in terms of social services and were able to manage cases efficiently and with knowledge of the underlying

causes.

From the outset, in the first year of the project, a lack of focus and concentration led to major setbacks in the timetable. Too many things were added to the initial project and the envelope kept getting fatter. This led to some lack of control over the implementation of phases and a scattering of resources and energy. This was aggravated by a misassessment of the time required to develop the new computer system. Moreover, no allowance had been made for setbacks and delays. As a result, while the other teams met their deadlines, the computer system wasn't ready; so the Department was stuck with neither a system nor the proper personnel, and for about 18 months had to rehire employees to do things the old way.

Introduction of the new case management system also encountered setbacks. At first, HRD-NB participants complained about the lack of information and training prior to the project: most team members had to learn the skills required to do the work on the job, and this led to a considerable waste of time. A specific task often took a day instead of an hour; HRD-NB personnel had computerized management tools at their fingertips but did not know how to use them. Moreover, Andersen/Accenture had overestimated the computer literacy of government personnel.

Project Partners

HRD-NB

The Department of Human Resources Development really completed the project because of its vision and leadership, as well as its openness to change. In fact, the Department shared with all personnel a vision of the future of HRD-NB that inspired every participant, a very precise mission statement, and clear objectives to gain their backing for the project. The steadfast support of the Premier, the Minister, the Deputy Minister and senior Department officials was greatly appreciated and helped with getting through hard times. The fact that only one rather than several departments was involved allowed for clearly defined leadership and relatively easy decision making. Department employees were also very open-minded about the proposed changes and really wanted to help the people who were their clients. The project was not seen as a simple effort to generate revenue or save money. Shared objectives along with a high degree of employee commitment and dedication facilitated progress with the project. It should be pointed out that, from the outset, regional personnel had been part of the work teams. Although the project got blown off course a few times along the way, it always managed to get back on track.

HRD-NB personnel had an excellent knowledge of their field, i.e., social services and the imperatives of service delivery. They could imagine any sort of scenario that might affect the calculation of social benefits. They also cared about their clients' best interests and clearly saw that their job was to provide swift and efficient aid for people in a crisis. HRD-NB had a very clear understanding of the realities of poverty and its psychological and social implications.

Through the partnership project with Andersen/Accenture (A/A), HRD-NB could tap into a broad pool of expertise via the subcontractors engaged by its partners — resources the

Department did not have. Its alliance with a private partner also gave it much more legal leeway because the Department gained access to expertise and know-how that its personnel lacked, particularly in project management and managing change, without hiring staff.

Andersen/Accenture

A/A personnel had tremendous technological expertise, along with a solid mastery of project-management tools and means. They also possessed the knowledge required to manage work processes: they knew how to come up with good business solutions. Their employees were particularly skilled in using software for presentations, leading groups and quickly finding documentation. Moreover, the firm had access to extensive external resources through subcontracting. Its staff was also very young, brimming with energy and, above all, highly productive. Their enthusiasm was infectious.

Thus the private partner had all the human and financial resources, along with the expertise required to make the project a success, which it did. But in the opinion of Department officials², A/A underestimated the magnitude of the project, which itself was poorly understood by the firm's management. The project's lack of internal visibility apparently had some effect on the allocation of the human and technical resources required for the project. Some members of management failed to understand that there was no ready-made solution to the Department's problems, and a custom-made one had to be created. Others were reluctant to allocate resources to a project with no guaranteed revenue, because the formula for performance-based contracts was unfamiliar or unknown. This led to numerous changes in project management on the private partner's side. The manager at HRD-NB had to deal with as many as four counterparts from A/A. The project too suffered from the high turnover rate in A/A personnel: a lot of knowledge acquired along the way was lost and additional costs had to be incurred for the outside experts to stay longer.

Unions and Employees

Transformation of the Department resulted in one union losing some 200 members while another gained about 75 with the new case-manager positions. To avoid excessive union pressure, the management team made sure the unions were always informed of upcoming decisions before their members so that they could claim some control over the situation. The unions might easily block the project agenda by filing complaints or grievances with the Labour Board. This is what the management team wanted to avoid by maintaining good communications with the unions, frequently consulting them and treating the laid-off employees generously.

Nonetheless, the resistance to change of some HRD-NB staff members, and the anxiety and nervousness created by the uncertainty or loss of a job were negative psychological factors that were difficult to eliminate from a project the size of the Alliance for Change. Nearly all employees were replaced, trained or assigned to positions in keeping with their skills. In general, jobs were enriched and salaries increased. All this unfolded rather smoothly. The two

² A/A Representatives refused to allow their employees to participate in this study; the views expressed therefore reflect the perceptions of HRD-NB officials.

unions were sold on the advantages of this type of project for their members and were involved at every stage of the reorganization by upholding and protecting the rights of their membership.

Beneficiaries

At first, social assistance beneficiaries didn't want to hear any talk of change; they did not want intrusions into their privacy nor to be forced to find a job. They were afraid of losing their social benefits. They also complained about not having enough access to managers, and not being treated fairly or equitably.

To make its clients aware and inform them of its objectives, HRD-NB had to work on changing their attitudes and convincing them of the value of the project and the longer-term benefits they stood to gain. The Department organized information sessions and public consultations, individual and group meetings with clients, and mail surveys. Case managers kept their clients informed of the project's progress. Letters explaining the format and details on the new cheques were sent to clients and, during the first weeks of the pilot project, a hotline for answering questions was maintained by seven or eight employees. Subsequently, a team was created to oversee the cheque delivery.

Technology

The work process and product testing teams were the ones that mainly dealt with the technology. They were involved in discussions on the type of technological applications to develop. Andersen submitted possible options and HRD-NB examined them. The information systems tended to focus on a particular program or activity whereas the Department needed an integrated system with the possibility of cross-referencing information. The solution decided upon was to create software that met the needs identified by A/A and HRD-NB. NB Case today is not what was mapped out originally. The system underwent changes during development in response to discussions and frequent testing with prototypes. Andersen and its programmers were in charge of the project's technological dimension. They expected to eliminate the Department's entire paper burden, but this could not be done completely. Medical prescriptions and hospital forms had to be kept on file because it was too expensive to use scanners to store the information electronically. Another aspect of the project that changed was the decision to continue using the faster and more powerful Government mainframe to issue cheques. The key performance indicators built into the computer system were determined together with HRD-NB. Everything that Department personnel can and cannot do is incorporated into the system, and the system explains why. Signatures are electronic. Managers have more autonomy and responsibility, while the system limits their exposure to risks.

The technology was a positive and essential aspect of the project, the ideal tool for the proposed transformation. Project participants are unanimous in expressing satisfaction with the technology used and the electronic product, NB Case. The computer system is so clear that any version can be used by managers who do not consider themselves bilingual. The only regret about the technology was the decision to use Windows 3.11 instead of 95, which was more expensive and would have delayed introduction of the system, which was already far behind

schedule. But a year later, Windows 95 was adopted.

Collaboration

Collaborative Mechanisms

Collaboration by the partners was based on a joint teams approach. Some 140 people worked on the project: 40% were HRD-NB and 60% A/A employees. The number of participants fluctuated with the arrival and departure of experts hired as subcontractors. To speed up communications, all participants were clustered in what they called “the war room,” which is where the entire project unfolded. The two partners were present on every team, day after day, and attended all the meetings. For example, the design of the income screen involved case officers from HRD-NB and computer specialists from A/A.

The project was co-managed by the two partners. Among other tasks, the HRD-NB manager had to make sure their private-sector counterpart received all the necessary information about the Department to be able to make informed decisions. Aside from the project-management team, other key teams were formed for managing change, policies and procedures, product testing and verification, operating system and information technology (IT). HRD-NB used the following selection criteria for project personnel: a natural inclination towards change, excellent mastery of an area of expertise, and effective team player.

Steady communication, both vertical and horizontal, was established for the full length of the project. Information flowed quickly from the Minister’s Office to the smallest regional branch, between team members and between teams. Thus the presence of regional personnel on every team kept the regions in the loop as the project unfolded. This initiative also provided the benefit of input from employees, who were very familiar with their clientele and occasionally could seek their views. The champions of change therefore played a key role in conveying information and collecting feedback. HRD-NB project team members underscored the ability of A/A experts to explain the complicated issues to the uninitiated at the Department and, within the teams, to relay the knowledge acquired by the old experts to newcomers. Thus, right at the outset, a team of four or five A/A representatives traveled around the Province to consult the regional offices and explain the project. And the team included Francophones, at least bilingual members, which surely made a difference in French-speaking regions. A/A personnel were generally capable of putting themselves on the same level as their partners and explaining to them whatever they did not know. They steadily coached and guided them through every stage, with a great deal of patience for the technical and technological ignorance of Department personnel, and never made them feel incompetent or inept.

At times, the differences between the partners’ attitudes and cultures became more pronounced and interfered with communication. In a private company, employees have to carry out decisions as swiftly and efficiently as possible; at the Department, every employee concerned by a decision had their say. Seniority and experience were important, not just competence or theoretical knowledge. Unfortunately, for the first meeting on managing change, A/A dispatched a recently graduated very young employee to explain what change was to HRD-NB personnel

with over 20 years of experience. The meeting had to be reheld! Despite these occasional snags, HRD-NB emphasized their partner's kindness, flexibility and sensitivity to their needs and requirements.

Nonetheless, the complexity and slowness of the decisionmaking process in the public sector, and the obligation of departmental accountability set by the government, were a constant irritant for the private partner. Given the numerous levels of approval in the public sector — Department, Minister, Cabinet, Premier — some decisions were slow in coming and any political pressure exerted to speed up the process was in vain. For a firm where decisionmaking power is concentrated at the executive level, it was hard to understand and accept the government machinery, and every delay had a negative impact on both project costs and the partner's patience. Moreover, the latter was completely unprepared to have its actions and statements closely scrutinized by the media. They learned the rules of transparency and access to information the hard way. After a few media gaffes, the Department became the sole spokesperson for the project, yet always defended Andersen.

Managing Change

Managing change was the project's main challenge. This was the most important aspect of the project, on which the Deputy Minister worked closely with the two co-managers. The managing change team was divided into two groups, one in charge of the human resources agenda and the other responsible for the employee training program. The former had a broader mandate: articulate the vision of the project, develop a communications plan, create the team of champions of change, and manage employee classification, migration, staffing and union relations.

The "champions of change" concept which came from A/A was very effectively used during the project. The champions of change were drawn from field personnel, one from each of the 21 regional offices and, if possible, selected by consensus by their colleagues based on the following criteria: trustworthiness, credibility, communication skills and enthusiasm for change. They travelled to Fredericton every three months. Presentations were prepared to inform them of the latest developments with the project. The Deputy Minister and team managers came to talk to them. Individual meetings were arranged to discuss specific regional problems. A direct line was installed for them. Aside from the work done by the champions of change, other means were used to keep Department personnel informed: memos, surveys, roadmaps, videos, posters, brochures and a direct line.

Project participants also played a vital role. Their strong commitment and enthusiasm got them through the tough, painful times. There were always some who hung in there and never gave up hope when the project was bogged down. At a time when other A/A projects were running into problems, the Alliance for Change partners decided that they would fight to the very end to make the project a success, and made a point of making that clear to the firm's management.

The fact of working side by side, every day, throughout the project fostered a spirit of helping one another and mutual understanding. This gave participants a chance to get to know each other well, both personally and professionally. Sharing the same living space also reinforced cooperation; it was virtually impossible not to settle differences when rubbing shoulders every

day. The partners from the private and public sectors adjusted to each other to such an extent that it was hard to tell them apart. But it wasn't always this way.

In fact, three A/A managers in succession were appointed during the project's first year. Their problems adapting to the public domain and, more specifically to social services, largely compromised smooth progress with the project. A/A' "human resource experts" were summoned to the rescue when the two partners were unable to work together. Andersen tried to impose ready-made ideas on the procedure to follow and failed to understand HRD-NB's mission of serving the needy. There is a big difference between developing a complex computer system and delivering a public service. The firm claimed to be an expert in managing change, but at the outset had played down the cultural change required of some Departmental personnel as well as clients. Moreover, the internal support and recognition given to its own employees left something to be desired. For instance, the firm had a tendency, at any time whatsoever, to pull people with a very good knowledge of HRD-NB operations out of the project and replace them with others totally unfamiliar with the organization. Conference calls with the firm's experts were no substitute for their on-site presence, which on numerous occasions created problems. It was the fourth manager appointed by Andersen who succeeded in getting the project back on the right track. This individual, considered very strict, knew how to make the necessary decisions to bring the project under control, both at the Department and A/A, even if it meant stepping on a few toes. Despite tensions, he kept the focus on change.

Performance

All participants in the Alliance for Change project have very vivid memories of it, and they all describe it in terms resounding with praise: a fantastic project, exciting and lots of fun, nerve-racking and exhausting, a source of personal growth and development, a tremendous success, a good business venture, a highly complex and innovative project, a project that generated substantial gains, a big exciting challenge, a wonderful success. They all emphasized the impact the project had not only on their professional careers, but also on their personal development.

Project and Collaborative Performance

The Alliance for Change attained its objectives. The Department achieved the planned reductions and savings. The number of social assistance cases dropped from 42,000 to 28,000, and the case managers handle 75 to 125 cases instead of 300 to 400. Income-assistance cheques are sent out within 24 hours instead of seven days. Project implementation fell at least two years behind the original schedule. Yet annual savings of \$8 million were achieved, and reimbursement of A/A's fees took 30 instead of the expected 60 months. Moreover, the savings were sufficient to cover the maintenance costs of the computer system. NB Case performs all the desired functions and put an end to the abuses generated by the old system.

HRD-NB expressed a high level of satisfaction with the project and the collaboration with a private partner. Most participants would do it all over again and only a few had reservations about the collaboration with A/A. These reservations concern the difficulty in forming a genuine partnership between a public organization and private enterprise. A real partnership implies that

both partners have equal influence on the entire project and decision-making power. Yet because HRD-NB depends on government decisions (whether or not to approve), it had no real control over project developments. By the same token, neither did the private firm.

The project brought about a major change in clients' attitudes. Beneficiaries now feel more in control of their situation; they can make choices. They also realize how much faster, fairer and more equitable the system is. They know that, if they want to break out of the vicious circle of poverty and dependency, the case managers can help them do it.

Project Benefits

The savings generated by the new service-delivery system make it possible to subsidize an entire series of new programs, many of which target youth both at home and in schools. The Saint John region now has a training program for its clients valued at \$3 to \$4 million. Program management partnerships have also been formed with community groups. The severance pay plan created during the project provided the model that the provincial government uses for the entire public service.

A/A also benefits from a computer system maintenance contract that earns it \$5 million a year. The 17 programmers assigned to the main office are in charge of the computer network, infrastructure, and system applications.

Despite its success, the project received negative media coverage, which marred its reputation. First of all, the Opposition parties pursued a strategy of trying to convince the public that the McKenna government's agenda was purely economic and that the government was insensitive to social issues. The media then got hold of information about a dozen lawsuits brought against Andersen/Accenture in both the United States and Europe over failed projects. And in Canada, the federal government cancelled a \$44.5-million Public Works contract because of major delays and failure to attain objectives. In New Brunswick, there was the failed attempt to transform the Department of Justice. All these problems tarnished the firm's reputation. Finally, there were the poorly timed statements by senior A/A officials describing the delays in delivering cheques to financial assistance beneficiaries as negligible. Nonetheless, the success of the Alliance for Change enabled the firm to land a \$200-million contract for a similar project in Ontario.

Despite these occasional problems with the media, the Alliance for Change project is considered a tremendous success. It not only brought about the reorganization of a department, but also fostered a change of culture with respect to social benefits and income-assistance services.

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Appendix: Transformation of the Service Delivery System

The old system was highly clerical and administrative, and mainly financial in nature: calculate income-assistance benefits as best possible, verify the amount on the cheque and make sure it was mailed on time. Cheque production involved obtaining a number of signed approvals and repeated forms to fill out. Clients might have to state their names 12 times in a row for various departmental procedures.

The computer system was antiquated — 16 years old compared to a normal seven-year operational cycle. Policies and procedures were confined to printed manuals with none of the material online. The applications used hundreds of codes that were hard to remember, and employees had to switch back and forth constantly to calculate the amount of income assistance. The application of official policies varied by both region and case.

The system was slow and rather inefficient. Applicants for social assistance were assigned a manager, who changed as the case was evaluated and the situation developed. Cases were divided into three categories: long-term (one meeting a year), medium-term (one meeting every three months), and short-term (one meeting a month). In addition, those taking job training depended on one manager for the training and another for the financial assistance, and there was scarcely any contact between the two.

The new computerized system of service delivery radically changed every step that applicants and clients had to go through, and was based on the use of two new work tools: case management and NB Case.

Case management divides files into two categories. Long-term cases are clients with little likelihood of leaving the income-assistance system due to their age, health, or a mental or physical handicap. Their managers work with community groups to help these clients. Active cases are those in which the manager helps the client re-enter the job market. The purpose of the career plan developed with the client is financial self-reliance and psychological independence. Clients always deal with the same case manager.

The case eligibility and classification process is handled by phone. The eligibility evaluation takes about 15 minutes by phone if the client can provide the official with the necessary information through preregistration. The information is entered into the NB Case computer system and, if the client is eligible, a meeting within eight days of the initial call is arranged, involving either a trip to the office to sign forms or, in 50% of cases, a visit by the needs evaluation specialist to verify some of the information and documents, and get the forms signed. The evaluator then gives the client the date of their first meeting (within the next 30 days) along with the name of their case manager, and has a preliminary discussion of the client's goals and objectives.

Following this meeting, a series of individual interviews are held to do a thorough assessment of the client's needs and determine what level of services the Department will provide. A client profile is prepared specifying strengths and areas where improvement is called for. Clients are in charge of their own career plans and the system includes a timetable for implementation of the

plan. The case manager's job is to oversee clients by providing all the pertinent information and supporting them in their efforts to become self-reliant. Managers do not do what the clients themselves are expected to do; they guide and encourage clients towards becoming self-reliant.

Despite its complexity and sophistication, NB Case is a user-friendly system. Information only has to be provided by a client once, and is immediately entered into a database. Income assistance is calculated on the basis of standard criteria specific to the information received. The system ensures uniform policy application because all policies are incorporated into it. The database can be used to create new programs adapted to clients' needs. The difference in work volume is substantial: 70% of a manager's time is spent on clients, with administrative procedures requiring less time and attention.

With the new system, clients were surprised to be asked numerous questions, but access to the system is broader. Even though the policies keep on changing, the way in which eligibility is determined is faster and more precise because the system uses more information and this data is more accurate. Moreover, clients themselves can access the system: they can view and check policies, and realize everyone gets treated the same way. Beneficiaries can also access their own files.