



Centre for Collaborative Government
Centre pour la collaboration gouvernementale

E-Government: Governing in the Information Age

Human Resources Development Canada, B.C. Region

As part of the Human Resources and Development Canada Leadership Conference on February 11-13, 2002, 150 managers from the Pacific and Yukon region attended a one and a half day learning event on the subject of e-government. The Centre for Collaborative Government (CCG) developed and delivered the agenda for this event, bringing together several experts on a variety of e-government issues from academia, federal and provincial governments, and private and third sector organizations. Participants engaged in discussions to examine how information and communications technologies are affecting service delivery, the organizational structure of government and the practices of governance and democracy in Canada. The agenda was based on the outcomes of the March 2001 Crossing Boundaries Conference in Ottawa, and research currently underway at CCG. See Appendix 1 for the agenda.

Setting the Context

In his keynote address on the first evening of the session, Don Lenihan, the Director of the Centre for Collaborative Government provided an overview of the scope of what e-government might mean. In his presentation, Don identified three themes for e-government:

- improving service delivery
- information as a new public resource
- democracy: extending public space

Don identified some of the challenges facing government as it tries to integrate services around client needs, including issues of privacy, accountability and interoperability.

He then outlined the strategic challenges facing government around information as a public resource. Putting the vast stores of government information and databases on-line brings with it all the challenges that are present in achieving integrated or seamless service delivery. Moreover, better use of information has the potential to build a smarter government, one that uses information more effectively to do better policy development by applying evidence and evaluation results. ICTs also allow government to achieve a higher and different level of accountability and transparency by allowing government departments to bring their reporting together around societal indicators and by enabling citizens to access information on government performance in new and more open ways.

On the theme of democracy: extending public space, Don described the governance triangle of citizens, public servants and politicians and suggested that technology can be used to involve citizens and stakeholders in decision-making processes more frequently, more directly, and in larger numbers. This has important implications for our democratic processes and for the changing relationships between and amongst citizens, public servants and different levels of government.

Conference Summary

The Morning Discussion

The First Two Themes: Government On-line – and Beyond

The morning session opened with Jim Thomas from the Centre for Collaborative Government and Larry Sanders from the Saskatchewan Council of Federal Officials discussing government on-line and beyond. The presentations, and the three workshops that followed later in the morning, explored the issues and challenges related to integrated service delivery, and information as a public resource.

Jim provided an overview of the current state of GOL initiatives and suggested that, while some progress is occurring, there are significant challenges achieving a real horizontal dimension, where services and information are grouped or clustered together and presented to clients in ways that respond to client needs. He suggested that the problem may be a lack of vision around where we are going in defining citizen-centred service delivery. He asked, by way of seeking a paradigm shift, what might happen if there were a Department of Client Needs whose mandate was to identify client needs and organize services and information around them. Could this hypothetical Department supply the missing vision? Could it be responsible for maintaining part of the Canada site around client needs? Could the regions play an important role in making this happen?

He observed that GOL must also include seeking ways of liberating the information holdings of government and its agencies. Information as a public resource has many other dimensions, and a real opportunity to achieve clustering might surface if departments could find ways of organizing their programs around societal indicators, at least for the purposes of reporting and coordinating efforts. An example around sustainable development was provided. Jim suggested that to make this happen, departments would need to address a number of policy issues, and postulated that the hypothetical Department of Client Needs might need to include a multi-department policy shop to make this happen.

Larry Sanders focused on the overall implications of GOL for the federal government in Canada and the possible “unintended consequences” of the widespread implementation of information technology. He speculated that GOL is more than just a new tool for service delivery, but rather it has the potential to become a new instrument for governance. He described how the third tier of GOL, the stage that focuses on multi-jurisdictional, integrated online service delivery, is creating major management challenges for conventional systems of strategic planning in public administration. The lack of a clear picture of what “Tier Three” will look like also indicates a visioning challenge for those trying to design and implement this stage of GOL.

That being said, he explained that this is a very exciting time to be in the public service: without our conventional strategic planning processes to guide us, we have to experiment, innovate and adapt. He suggested that in order to succeed, public servants will still have to rely on traditional skills and values, such as critical thinking, planning, resiliency, honesty, neutrality and integrity, but that new roles are also emerging. As they transition to a knowledge society, public servants will be expected to become leaders, knowledge managers, problem solvers and facilitators. In other words, GOL is one of the main drivers that is moving the public service from a static to a dynamic workforce.

More specifically, Mr. Sanders described the federal and regional networks that are working on a new conceptual framework for a vision of e-government and that are exploring many of the high-level issues. For example, will the e-government process be driven from the centre (PCO and TBS) or will regions be truly engaged? At what stage does the federal vision of e-government start coordinating with similar work being done by provinces, municipalities and NGOs? He

underlined that many of the best lessons learned will come from the regions and it is critical that an e-government vision emphasize decentralization.

As a result of his work with the Government of Saskatchewan's AskSask initiative (Aboriginal Services Kiosk), the Saskatchewan Council of Federal Officials has learned a great deal about why GOL is so difficult. This includes the following points: GOL may be a new governing instrument that we do not know entirely how to use. GOL does not have a clearly defined sense of what it will look like beyond 2005. Conventional strategic planning systems do not "fit" the GOL scenario because of its multi-jurisdictional complexities. And finally, public servants will be obliged to experiment and innovate with GOL.

Addressing the Challenges: The Morning Workshops

1. Privacy Considerations

Lorraine Dickson, BC Office of Information and Privacy Commission

Privacy is a malleable concept. In this context, the focus is on information privacy. Fundamental privacy rights require constitutional underpinnings. They are essential to the dignity and integrity of the individual, and they have a variety of cultural significances. As in most of the western world, privacy legislation in Canada is informational and is based on the right to control information about oneself. Unlike much of Europe however, privacy is not a human right in the Charter in Canada. In Europe, for example, courts have upheld the right of individual privacy through "bubble zones" at abortion clinics.

E-government refers to new IT methods for communicating with citizens, new IT methods for service delivery, and also encompasses governance initiatives such as voting, referenda, and consultations. Privacy is a significant issue in matters of e-government, and has become increasingly so since September 11th. Compared to the rest of Canada, privacy concerns in B.C. are off the scale. There is an increase in outsourcing of data services, increased interest in data matching and in longitudinal studies which require personal identifiers to stay with the data (data mining), and there are thousands of databases that are waiting to be put to use. How should privacy be protected while maximizing the use of information?

There are many risks and benefits of moving to e-government. They include service quality improvements, better decision-making, cost savings and efficiencies, surveillance of citizens, profiling of citizens, and adverse decisions based on data-sharing or matching. There is an enormous amount of pressure on government to share/match data – requests for this are much more common than in the past.

Currently, there is no analytical framework to deal with privacy. As a result, Ms. Dickson predicted that where privacy laws impede e-government, they will be changed ad hoc. But she warned that this must not become the default response. Ad hoc changes in laws will cause significant problems. To combat this she suggested that government dialogue more with the public about privacy. A "blindsided" public will file complaints and will feel vulnerable if it feels it has to give up information to get services it needs/wants. There may be a need for public sector CPOs (Chief Privacy Officers). These individuals should be at a fairly high level in the organization, following the example of CPOs in the private sector, who are given a good deal of authority.

In terms of existing privacy rules, Canadian privacy laws incorporate so-called 'fair information practices,' which are long-standing international rules. These laws impose statutory limits on public sector's collection, use and disclosure of personal information. The idea is to control the state's ability to compel provision of information from citizens, and in turn to give citizens some control over, at least knowledge of, what personal information is being collected, used and disclosed. The rules are based on several principles, including accountability, clear identification

of purposes, consent, limited use and the length of time of disclosure/retention. Other principles also include accuracy, safeguards, openness, individual access, challenges to compliance. Ms. Dickson stressed that it is very expensive to retain information for long periods of time.

Following the presentation, participants raised the issue of consent. There is a difference between choosing to give information and being requested to give information. They also discussed the privacy benefits to using electronic information versus paper information. For example, electronic information leaves an audit trail (e.g. login failures tracked, after hours use, etc.) while paper/hard copy information may allow for unauthorized record checking. Another participant raised issues in favour of data matching, using the example of a deceased's hospital records being linked to other records for the person, so that all government-related matters could be dealt with automatically. In response to questions about international best practices, participants heard that Sweden, Denmark, France, Finland have wide open systems and are also the leaders in data protection legislation (e.g. phone number is the gateway to information).

Ms. Dickson then led the group in a discussion around a series of privacy case studies. She proposed the idea that government could provide the service of electronic multiple change of address requests to various government ministries with disclosure that information is collected for address change purposes and will be shared across agencies/ministries for that purpose. Participants commented that the public would be leery or too lacking in trust of the system. How does the system know that you are the person whose records are being changed? Experience, culture, convenience, efficiency can all affect what one wants or permits

In another example, a government program area is considering significant changes and wishes to consult with clients. Participants are requested to identify themselves, provide e-mail address/contact particulars, family member names for those using the program. Privacy policy is not mentioned and it is silent on the privacy aspects of the ministry's activities. Participants said that it was inappropriate to request names of family members. Lack of privacy could lead to clients being contacted about their criticism in an evaluation, which is a major problem. Clear consent should be required for any such program.

A third example is a youth at risk identification program. Data matching can result in a list of targeted youth for apprehension and detention without charge for a specific period. Participants raised several questions and issues: Will youth give accurate information if they know that they may be apprehended and detained? How do you balance child protection with respecting their individual right to privacy? Another unintended consequence is that this could drive youth away from needed treatment

Finally, participants considered the example of posting of 50+ year census data on the Statistics Canada website containing personal information. Currently, census forms are available for viewing in Ottawa, however, many interested parties are unable to travel to Ottawa (e.g. due to cost). Participants suggested the establishment of user accounts. The benefits were clear to many; at the City of Victoria where the property assessment rolls were available via the Internet – 20,000 website hits versus the usual, significantly lower number of hits to the city's website. One unintended consequence could be theft of identification.

2. Accountability Considerations

Marcia Barrados – Assistant Auditor General – Office of the Auditor General of Canada

Current notions of accountability fly in the face of traditional (vertical) government structures. Yet this can often be reduced to a blame game and does nothing to encourage and educate better managers and decision making processes. In order to embrace new notions of public accountability, there must be a redefinition of the term that is based on mutually agreed expectations of what results and expenditures will be measured and reported. It must be based

on an equitable relationship where both sides must agree on what needs to be at the centre of responsibility, while also maintaining a reporting and reviewing capacity to facilitate learning.

Accountability can be complicated by competing bodies and their interests, such as expenditures vs. results achieved. There must be an agreement on the arrangement stating what exactly are measurable definitions of accountability. What is deemed measurable (accountable) and what results (outputs) should be evaluated? New notions of accountability that bring the public in closer collaboration risk taking all expenditures and end results out of the essential broader context. In order to maintain the results within their context, we must work to connect the inputs to the outputs when presented to the public. Ms. Barrados recommends that reporting be conducted at the macro-level result. While reporting on such results, measures will be necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of each player's contributions. Yet, as programs become increasingly intertwined horizontally, it can be difficult to evaluate the limitations of each program.

Government decisions are usually well-researched and have broad justifications ; by demanding public accountability we allow for selective searching and thus taking away the essential broader context that allows decisions to stand on these broad merits when questioned by opposition parties and critical publics. How do you link reporting and understanding within this necessary broader context? We cannot control information in order to frame it in desirable terms, so in each policy document, we must connect the inputs and outputs together in a broad accountability framework.

Ms. Barrados then moved on the challenges of working in horizontal structures. One of the greatest challenges we face is coordinating policies and results that have traditionally been housed in their own jurisdictions. How do you get departments to undertake inter-disciplinary work? The levers to deal with these traditionally vertical structures are not in place right now. Communication between vertical structures must occur through networking and simple dialogue to bridge this traditional divide. But in order to get anything substantial done, there must be legislation indicating a clear re-allocation of accountability. For this to happen, the Privy Council Office and the Treasury Board Secretariat will have to substantially influence decision makers.

Will networked or shared accountability actually change anything? Have we suddenly found a revolutionary concept that assures responsive, responsible government, or rather, isn't accountability a term that has always been in place? The concern is that the mechanisms discussed that will ensure this process are still very uncertain and do not ensure any more accountability than before, while placing additional pressures on the public servant.

3. Managing Horizontally in a Vertical World **Jay Kaufman & Don Lenihan, CCG**

At the heart of this issue, is the problem of integration. While there are several best practices and good cases on horizontal management, these can be classified more along the lines of "low-hanging fruit," or easier wins that don't get at the big obstacles.

The real barriers to horizontal management are in program and departmental organization, the lack of technical interoperability, privacy, accountability, legislation, jurisdiction, organizational culture and leadership. The conventional, more vertical, model of government rests on a clear separation of roles and responsibilities. As we move towards more horizontal management, the organizational metaphor of government as a "machine" shifts to the metaphor of government as a "network." This is not to say that we could be moving from a structure that is totally vertical, to one that is totally horizontal. But, we are moving along a continuum with varying degrees of verticality and horizontality, and we are also experiencing a culture change in the areas of service quality and human resources.

Jay Kaufman offered his own experiences in horizontal managements a former deputy minister in both the Manitoba and Ontario governments and as a private consultant to government and public sector groups who are finding it difficult to work across government departments and ministries. Horizontal management is a lot more than simply coordinating pieces of government here and there; it is actually about realigning government.

He observed that horizontal management is one of government's biggest challenges. It is not just about managing programs and services inside government – it is about managing relationships. Client, stakeholder, agency and political relationships are central to this issue.

Horizontal management is a popular buzzword but it often has a bad reputation. Top of mind reactions from many public servants include: it's something we do off the side of our desk; there are no rewards, horizontal management is not in the job descriptions or performance contracts; it's a time-waster, all I do is attend meetings; or it takes too long to produce results; it's too cost-prohibitive; it's a technology not a program or policy or Ottawa hasn't got its act together so we can be expected to do horizontal management out in the regions/branch offices. To better understand the challenge of horizontal management, we have to realize that the burden of fragmentation in government falls to client, stakeholder and community organizations. It is those outside government who take on the task of coordinating the various pieces. For integration to become a reality, there needs to be a shift from the citizen or community as integrator to the government as integrator. Technology is enabling government to start doing this in many ways, including services online, single window access, clustering and reorganizing program delivery. As government moves towards service integration, it will inevitably be forced to move towards the harmonization of policies, planning and systems that support cross-cutting goals and program outcomes.

What are the implications for government? Integration brings in a new array of players, introduces a complex intergovernmental overlay, energizes new, and possibly competing, interests and perspectives, and introduces new power dynamics. It is a mistake to assume that the all the players operate with the same value proposition. Imbalances and competing interest are just two of the barriers. The perception often is that horizontal management is high risk, and the fact is many people resist or withdraw from high-risk situations. Difficult policy and funding choices are involved. Some of these barriers are so insurmountable that structural change is viewed as the only solution.

An example is health and social services integration. This idea to improve services and control costs has been around for a long time, but it has proven to be a major horizontal management challenge. Part of the problem is that each system operates with different models and philosophies of service delivery, and with different decision- and policy- making orientations. To date there are few examples of successful health and social service system integration.

ICTs have long since been considered great connectors, but why are they still not yet great integrators? The driving forces of ICTs – the IT workers – are still predominantly focused inside the organization, removed from the needs and perspectives of the external clients their systems are intended to serve. If the wave of horizontal management is being driven by technology, then I have to know something of its potential and limitations – but there is still a strategic ICT literacy gap among senior public servants and politicians. To build a vision of a smart department, government needs a smart culture. This will not happen if the ICT professionals remain disconnected from the strategic policy professionals and the program thinkers, as is largely the case now.

So what does successful horizontal management entail? First, you need to understand the critical success factors and adopt approaches and strategies that take them into account. Second, develop a shared vision, but leave a good deal of flexibility on how to implement it. And last, seek

out and obtain strong executive commitment and strategic leadership. What can we do to take on the challenge of horizontal management? Some strategies include the following:

- Building a culture of horizontal management and collaboration: look at your own organization, know your own strengths and weaknesses and adjust accordingly; introduce team-based practices that connect in ICT professionals; start on a modest scale and then innovate to build experience and trust over the long run; and, develop collaborative tools, ie: joint planning and evaluation and best practice guides.
- Start bridging the strategic ICT literacy gap: invest in strategic ICT learning; integrate ICT more closely to strategic planning; apply ICT solutions thinking to policy and program problems; and, have policy and program executives/managers lead strategic ICT projects.
- Create rewards and incentives for collaboration: incorporate horizontal principles and objectives into performance contracts; and, build horizontal project management experience into career planning.

During the discussion, one HRDC participant stated that he had more success on horizontal management issues when a community need was identified. Another participant asked what do you need to do to get out-of-the-box thinking going in the organization. ICTs are not always the right solutions or enablers for every problem. There is a serious lack of resources to support horizontal management initiatives. It was suggested that departments try to find “glue” money to get groups together to talk about and collaborate on common issues. Acting out of the box can be a unique but isolating experience. What often happens in these situations is that you push really far in the direction of horizontal management and then you back off a bit. Other participants commented that the culture and structure of “silos” in government, and the lack of political support are the biggest challenges facing horizontal management.

Afternoon Discussion

The Third Theme: E-democracy – Extending Public Space

To kick off the afternoon discussions on e-democracy, John Langford and Fiona MacCool outlined their perspectives on e-democracy and the implications that ICTs may have for citizen consultation and engagement, as well as the potential implications for politicians.

John Langford provided the group with an overview of what e-democracy is in theory versus e-democracy in reality. The “niche” for e-democracy lies in the argument that representative democracy is stagnant and behind the times. E-democracy offers a new and powerful alternative to the current situation, but it raises big issues for the key players: elected officials, public servants, and interest groups. Currently, Canada has a government that is dominated by the executive, special interest groups are dominating public discourse, political and electoral participation is declining, and voters are feeling more and more powerless.

If the e-democracy vision is realized, it is expected to go a long way to addressing these problems. The vision foresees direct citizen access to information, direct communication with elected officials and public servants, electronic political mobilization and direct electronic polling, voting and referenda. In fact, our current GOL initiative has the potential to morph into several avenues of e-democracy, such as e-information, e-consultation, e-purchasing, e-accountability, e-decision-making and e-elections.

But are citizens ready for this? He argues that they are not. Major issues such as deliberative engagement, access and equity in consultation processes, and surveillance and privacy violations remain to be addressed. Interest groups are concerned about the emergence of new, virtual groups, and government is concerned about the polarization and paralysis of public

debate. The traditional media are nervous about losing status and influence as they face the emergence of “new” niche players competing on a new field – the internet. The impact of commercialization and media convergence on democracy is also unclear. Legislators expect to have problems maintaining the legitimacy of representation, adapting to new roles, and creating virtual parliamentary forums. Political parties feel susceptible to the demand for information on policy platforms. As well, they have given little attention to undertaking deliberative engagement. He also explained that elected officials are concerned about retaining control of policy making, of providing universal connectivity, and of avoiding a bureaucratic takeover.

As a result of these issues, governments are now moving cautiously. They are focused on extending existing practices, creating online access to relevant documents, and putting parliamentary debate and committee proceedings online. But nonetheless, he warned that the democratic gap is widening as a result of this unmanaged move to e-democracy. There is no underlying institutional reform. The culture of secrecy remains intact, there is an ineffective accommodation of cyberactivism, and little interest in redefining citizenship in a digital world. The questions this leaves for public servants include: how much policy and performance information should they put online? Which tools should they use for engagement? How do you build in direct accountability? How can government avoid the “big brother” label? Will e-democracy initiatives threaten the political masters?

Fiona MacCool gave an overview of the differences between online citizen consultation and online citizen engagement. She described online consultation as a process by which government creates opportunities for citizens to provide feedback, through online forms and email links. But online engagement is an in-depth deliberative approach that creates opportunities for the general public or selected representatives to participate in an online dialogue. Most online consultation is one way and cumbersome, for example, it offers citizens the chance to read a 160-page legal document and then gives them an email form where they can send comments for a week or two. This is not a valuable or useful method of online consultation and more importantly, is not true engagement.

She explained that there are three types of challenges inherent in online citizen engagement. There are challenges to government, which include choosing the right tools and sharing the right information. They also include managing the expectations of participants, addressing technical limitations or lack of familiarity with online communications, and the capacity of government to staff the consultation team. There are challenges for citizens, which include accessibility and the digital divide, and adequate education on policy issues and government process. There are also challenges for both government and citizens: neither party can give strong opinions without feeling as if they have to take responsibility for them. There is also a challenge around transparency – the informality of the internet does not work well with the tightly run and managed system of government communications.

Ms. MacCool identified several principles that should be maintained in online citizen engagement: clarity, inclusiveness, simplicity, transparency, accessibility, mutual respect, accountability and commitment. She also pointed out that technical innovation should only be attempted when the timeframe permits, and that consultation teams should ensure they build on success and learning. In closing, she stressed that online engagement is a participant-centred activity and it should not detract from other modes of consultation, such as face-to-face and town hall meetings.

Addressing the Challenges: The Afternoon Workshops

1. E-Government and Cyber-activism John Langford and Don Lenihan

It is useful to contrast the Internet with other communication technologies. The phone is a one-to-one structure, the television is one-to-many structure, but the Internet is a many-to-many structure. This is truly a transformative technology. Not all technologies are transformative. The typewriter did not have the impact of the printing press. The Internet is transformative, not only because it links individuals and organizations in many ways, but because its “many-to-many” structure makes information accessible in a way that it has never been before. It was suggested that this will transform representative government. In traditional structures, the people on top control the information flow. Transformative technologies such as the Internet diffuse information; elites cannot control information in the same way as with TV

Through the diagram of the Governance Triangle, Don explained traditional relationships in democratic society: citizens mandated elected representatives to make policy decisions, elected representatives in turned mandated the government to implement policy, and the government delivered policy implementation to citizens again. “Mandate” meant much more than before and almost does not make sense anymore. The lines between these relationships have blurred to the point that mandate is unclear. The model cannot continue the way it currently operates.

It raises a number of questions. How involved do citizens want to become in democracy? How inclusive can governance be without being ineffective? Can we balance representative and participatory models? What is the role of MPs? What is the role of public servants? Can we steer a middle course between populism and elitism? There has been a cultural change regarding populism: the consensus is that we now know that it will lead to bad governance. How involved do citizens want to become? How can IT tools enhance things you are doing? Would you only get responses from groups or would you get a wider audience? Do you have a pile of information that would create a more informed public? Can you anticipate the benefits and problems you may encounter?

Although special interest groups may be more involved initially, this may force people to participate in the broader discussion. This may have to happen first before government can engage the public at large in the conversation. Don Lenihan responded by referring to the current top-down approach of government regarding public consultation. The more technology government has, the more it has the ability to communicate/dialogue with citizens. But, he stressed, people do not always want decision-making participation in government. Only when something is meaningful to them (e.g. a local park), do people get involved.

How involved are citizens capable of becoming? How you engage the public is through “intentional” conversations. These should enable the public to understand that the government can help with their concerns. Another participant added comments about concerns the public has about government responsiveness – why should the public participate when it thinks that its opinions will not go anywhere? A “groundswell” may be needed to engage the public and to communicate the message that their comments will go someplace useful. It was suggested that there might be a “hole” in the process. Perhaps government and citizens need a connector from the “top” to create discussion. This should be the role of politicians – that of a bridge. They could be the connectors in community consultation.

Two outcomes often result from citizen engagement exercises: there is profound input from special interest groups so that only one voice and perspective prevail; and there so much diverse input that no clear recommendations or changes can be made to the policy or program. There is a concern about opening up such public discussions since they lead to unmanageable quantities of data. In the direct democracy model, we are not doing away with government, but the role of decision makers would change dramatically.

The concern is how to ask the right questions in a consultation. The Internet is a tool to do our jobs better, to gather information in a different way. Although the Internet provides an additional

effective tool to engage the citizenry, it is still more than that. It is not just for collecting information, but it is also for listening to the public and changing minds because of the input.

The proportional representation model may be better for e-democracy because it is more responsive to political change and diversity. It was suggested that there still needs to be a change in political culture. Decentralized decision-making may be part of the change. The Internet makes it cheaper for groups to get together to pursue a common interest. A movement easily can turn into a party, and so we need proportional representation to make this work in a stable fashion. We currently enjoy a very stable two-party system under our "first-past-the-post" system. However, the new Liberal government in Victoria seems to be ignoring special interest groups. There is an interest to engage in more direct democracy vehicles, more direct consultation with citizens, and a plan to bypass special interest group.

What if there is a concern about the needs/rights of minority groups versus the majority? The Liberal government is asking the majority to pass judgment on five percent of the population with regard to aboriginal treaties, but without engaging in any dialogue with aboriginal people. A referendum allows the public to not look aboriginals in the face, just check boxes. It is the responsibility of government to seek out minority voices for major decisions such as this.

This led participants to ask about the broader question of the digital divide. How would e-democracy deal with the "excluded sector"? These processes will marginalize some groups, and therefore we must make sure that the government does not allow this to happen. There is a need to make the "digital divide" smaller. Even if the "pipes" are built, one cannot put the Internet in each home or ensure equal use by gender. There are technical and socio-economic elements to consider.

In e-democracy/e-government initiatives, there is a tendency to "pick low hanging fruit", and go for the easiest possible accomplishments. As a result, is there an internal bias already built in to the process? Is there higher participation within the business community? Is the "digital divide" being reinforced?

In closing, HRDC participants suggested that MPs and elected officials should try to be apolitical with regards to e-democracy. MPs should be facilitators in policy discussions but the reality is that they are likely only concerned about re-election. Donald Lenihan spoke from his own experience and stated that most MPs care about policies and their ridings. MPs want to get the public involved when they think that there will be a meaningful debate that will be useful. The public will probably want to participate in these cases.

2. Citizen Engagement in a Digital World

Penny Goldsmith, Povnet, & Jim Thomas

Citizen engagement as an ongoing dialogue between citizens and government that ensures participation and inclusion. Contrast this with consultation, which is meant to obtain citizen input and make the public policy solutions more responsive. E-democracy implies a different dynamic. For example, e-consultation is usually a series of one-off projects as opposed to ongoing consultation. There are several drawbacks to e-consultation, including the following:

- Limited mechanisms for feedback, responses are not always timely and they can be out of date
- The responses offered can often be out of date.
- There is no way to ensure consultations that are representative of the public.
- The process can take the politician out of the consultation process, turning dialogue into a direct conversation only involving public servants and the public. For this reason, politicians often resist such developments.

- Those on the other side of the “digital divide” will be difficult to consult with and so there is not a representative sample of the population being considered.

The Internet can be a positive tool in formulating responsive public policy. But there are several ways that government can take initiative in an online environment, for example, as an active moderator or a passive observer. What should be the role of government on these sites? This is best determined by the nature of the discussion that will take place in each circumstance.

What types of online environments are best for this type of consultation? One possible medium for this is a government portal site, which would be an authoritative and citizen-oriented resource. Within this framework, citizens could join in constructive discussions that are set against a vast repository of information. One such project is currently underway at the Department of Canadian Heritage. Canadian Heritage is developing “CanadaPlace,” a cultural portal online that gives Canadians access to all holdings in its Department and 16 portfolio agencies. Within CanadaPlace is the “Digital Commons,” an online space where citizens come to engage in discussion with each other on issues such as culture, identity, arts, media, and what it means to be Canadian. The vision for the Digital Commons not only includes the participation of Canadians writ large, but it is also designed to include the participation of senior public servants and elected officials. A pilot project on the Digital Commons is currently underway.

Penny Goldsmith from Povnet gave participants a real-life example of how communities organize online. Povnet, established in 1997, facilitates an open discussion online about poverty issues for people in British Columbia. Povnet’s focus is to explain and detail citizen’s rights to the affected public. The goal of the community is to reach a critical mass that allows the site to become a functional and necessary part of a community. Online communities have a vital place within the offline world. For her and her stakeholders, the Internet is an important tool to be used for discussion between advocates and those affected by policy.

What is the difference between personal and online consultation? Are online consultation requests easier to ignore and dismiss? Could online consultation reduce the idea of democracy to a series of simplistic and informal polls? There was concern that this could reduce research and public consultation to popular opinion surveys. There was also a concern about technological exclusion. The medium is the message – because technology dictates the processes and structure of the conversation, the bar for public consultation changes and can restrict new entrants or forms of dialogue. But of course, it is important to keep in mind that a government sponsored forum is one of many ways to engage the public in constructive dialogue.

Web sites such as Povnet.org can be used to encourage consultation with the public by securing and establishing themselves in physical communities (such as in East Vancouver area), acting as a complement to and facilitator of consultations with the government that already exist. Such web sites do not replace traditional means of communication with public officials, but rather complement and extend the capabilities of consultation and open avenues for communication with people who traditionally have not been included in the process.

Government ministries such as HRDC are already engaged in consultations with their clients more than they may give themselves credit for (through representatives, call centres, etc). Ministries and bureaucrats may have reason to fear initiatives such as e-governance / e-consultations because they have the potential to crowd out different groups in society. The primary goal of departments such as HRDC is to provide effective and equal services to the public. But if public servants are in a constant consultations process, they will be unable to achieve any consensus on the application of policy, and this will complicate program and service delivery ongoing.

3. The Digital Divide

Peter Royce – Vancouver Community Network & Jay Kaufman

Peter Royce opened the session with a general overview of the digital divide. In his opinion, Canadians are nowhere near the goal of universal Internet access, such as the ambitious targets set out by initiatives like the federal government's Connecting Canadians. Using evidence from Statistics Canada, he explained that only 51% of people have home Internet connections. Among those who did not have home access, they cited reasons such as cost, lack of interest and lack of need as the main impediments. The latter two will be the hardest to overcome in bridging the digital divide. It is critical to develop strategies to close the divide, because as technology advances, the split between urban and rural becomes more and more critical.

The Vancouver Community Network's (VCN) approach to tackling this issue revolves around an exploration of use and value. There is an oversimplification in the term "digital divide," that neglects the whole range of use and value of the Internet. As a result, he believes that public and private sector alike are not taking advantage of the many partnerships and synergies exist. He used the example of the disconnect between the Rural Secretariat and National Broadband Task Force. The digital divide is more than a technical issue; it is actually a social and economic one.

The VCN operates a free, public, non-commercial computer centre in the greater Vancouver region to create public space on the Internet. At the heart of VCN's mission is the belief that universal access is essential for democracy, and that public space is necessary for citizens to have a voice and be represented. In terms of specific activities, VCN promotes community development and Internet access, it helps new users get online, it provide public terminals, it acts as a host for community information providers, and has built an index of community information and groups.

Some interesting initiatives that are worth promoting include:

- VoINet: a volunteer access program through Industry Canada
- Community Access Point (CAP): working with a tri-city area to set up public access points (from a hardware perspective mostly)
- Technical Volunteer Web: address the "one-off" problem of websites that are built by volunteers, who then become too busy to maintain it or move on – this group has inhouse volunteers to maintain websites and provide continuity
- SpaWeb: a legal and health information site reaches out to Spanish-speaking Canadians
- Community Building Projects: using old computers to set up public access networks

Peter Royce concluded by describing for the participants the other types of access models, designed to address a variety of social and economic situations. These include community technology centers that largely depend on the urban and private sector for support; schools and colleges – these will become more important in the future as this is where the next generation of users will be introduced to technology; public libraries – but the drawback here is that you can't run an email list or publish material; job banks – this is an HRDC model; and, internet cafes – these are for-profit organizations.

Jay Kaufman's presentation focused on what he called a third digital divide in Canada; the situation concerning ICTs and Aboriginal peoples. He began by distinguishing between what he called a dual and a third digital divide. The more common definition of the digital divide implies a separation between those who have access to and skills to use information and communications technologies, and those who do not. He has termed them the "techno-haves" and the "techno-have nots." The extent of this divide is measured against such factors as telephone penetration, computer ownership, Internet access, and the type of use. This definition, and the way we

measure the gap between the haves and have-nots, helps to shape our understanding of the problem.

Why is there such a polarization here? Those who fall into the category of the have-nots are usually characterized by some of the following factors: low income and education, older than 55, urban vs. rural or isolated areas, and whether or not they believe they will get a personal or social benefit out of using ICTs. Traditional solutions to this digital divide, he suggests, focus on increasing both access and skills.

The third digital divide incorporates another separation, beyond simply access or technical skills development. Aboriginal are worse off in both of these areas, but the socio-cultural barriers and risks have not been taken into account in either the definition of the problem or the measurement of the gap. Issues such as cultural appropriation and loss are certainly major obstacles in many Aboriginal communities. Nor is capacity to improve the standard of living, and future economic and social progress through ICTs considered as a factor. There are huge implications from Aboriginal peoples being excluded from the growth of the knowledge economy. A failure to make Aboriginal communities full participants in the knowledge economy would dramatically worsen the situation of communities and individuals. He quoted Matthew Coon Come, National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, "We missed the industrial revolution. We will not miss the information technology revolution. Our citizens, and especially our youth, are ready to take full advantage of this revolution and the possibilities offered."

There are a number of opportunities to use ICTs to improve the social and economic well-being of aboriginal communities, such as telehealth, long-distance education and training, cultural renewal and development, online purchasing and e-commerce, information access, improvements to governance and accountability systems, and new local telecom employment opportunities. There are several examples of First Nations ICT and smart community initiatives. They can be viewed on the following links:

- knet.ca - Keewaytinook Okimakanak's Kuh-ke-nah Network (K-Net)
- www.apcfn.ca - Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nations Chiefs Secretariat
- www.firstnationhelp.com - Atlantic Canada's First Nation Help Desk

How do we move this agenda forward? One place to start is with the development of a First Nations-driven agenda on ICTs. He noted that the Centre for Collaborative Government and the Atlantic Policy Congress have partnered on a series of 5 roundtables, along with five federal departments to explore the role of ICT in the process of First Nation rebuilding. The events have included representatives from all levels of government, private and third sector organizations, and First Nations in the Atlantic region. The discussions to date have been dynamic and revealing – we have learned a great deal so far.

First, the problem is not just about Internet access – the emphasis on access hits at many community fears. This is not to say that high-speed or broadband access is not critical, it is just not the only focus of the discussion. There is also a lack of political leadership. Politicians don't understand or really see the benefits of ICTs and they have many competing priorities. Building a long-term vision requires First Nations' involvement and a strong connection to First Nations values. The best way to position ICTs in FN communities is as an enabler of tangible benefits. Benefits include serve delivery innovation, preservation of culture, showing how ICTs can enhance community programs and initiatives, and discovering that high tech solutions are not always the right way to go. The benefit where people see the most payoffs is connecting communities and people.

Some elements of the current APC vision of ICTs seem to be working well, such as fitting ICT into the concept of nation building, responses that are geared to all sectors of the community, the

concept of an integrated technology community, connecting on and off-reserve members, and the idea of partnerships.

What are the implications for federal e-government policy? The Government of Canada should develop strategic national approach to tackling the Aboriginal digital divide. They are currently not positioned to do this, and they need to make it a higher priority. The federal government should also consider partnerships with First Nation leaders, organization and communities to help define the right strategy and priorities. Such a strategy should go beyond the issues of skills and access to include capacity building and the development of applications that will produce practical outcomes for communities. HRDC is well-positioned to address digital divide challenges in the areas of skills and capacity building, especially where it concerns youth and training strategies.

Participants raised the issue of sustainability of networks. How will Aboriginal communities maintain and grow in the ICT environment? Communities will need more training and more help in the future. Often they will receive funding for a three or four year program, but they will need more if they are to become self-sustaining down the line.

Other participants asked about the affordability of Internet access. Can the government put a solution in place to address that segment of the population that doesn't have access? What about phones? The government didn't put phones in everyone's homes at public cost. This is a critical policy decision governments have to make. Aboriginal communities don't have the same resources as other communities do, and far less resources than governments to launch ICT initiatives.