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Collaboration in Government

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Introduction

Collaboration allows the efforts of two or more to accomplish more than the sum of their individual efforts. Collaboration between government entities, between subdivisions in a government entity, between businesses and the government, and between individuals and their governments is a long sought goal. It can lead to better service to the public, lower taxes, better decision-making and greater public participation in government processes. Collaboration is not new; it has long been a tool of governments who strive to improve the service they provide to their constituents. There are a great number of examples where government has successfully collaborated with others. Unfortunately many collaborative opportunities are missed, and others fade due to the high level of effort needed to keep them working successfully. E-government tools do not change the need for and desirability of collaboration, they just make it easier to do, more cost-effective, easier to monitor, and thus easier to maintain. The decision on how, whether and when to collaborate remains with the elected or high-level administrative officials.

E-Government technology changes collaboration in three ways, by improving communications between the entities, automating the processes and allowing better monitoring. The improved communications allows immediate transfer of information with less effort. Often the new communication methods reduce human interaction, which can create logjams in the process. Just finding the time, and taking the trouble to contact the next person in the process takes time, and leads to the possibility of not getting the collaboration done. Contact with the public is improved by making the names of interested parties much easier to find. Traditionally the names of people making requests regarding specific issues are spread throughout the organization. Recent e-business tools can compile these lists of interested constituents, and make them accessible when needed.

A concern with collaborative programs is whether it is being implemented as originally planned, and that actual benefits are realized. This is critical when the program depends on the cooperation of many each groups costs are predetermined. E-government tools can connect back-end financial systems to monitor or charge costs as agreed. The details of each transaction and cost can be reviewed. Compliance with agreements can be tabulated and monitored to ensure that the original intent of the collaborative effort are being met, and if not, provides the information necessary to correct the situation.

Discussion

There are many public expectations that can be addressed using collaboration along with solutions such as provided by the mySAP,com e-government platform. Some examples are discussed below.

The Public Expects Single Point Shopping

Most members of the public recognize very little difference between the multitudes of government agencies that exist. There is a basic expectation that when you have a problem with their street, you can make one call. Citizens quickly lose patience as they are referred to different agencies to handle the pothole, the leaking hydrant, the city street light, and then the street light that's on the state route, and so on. This type of separation between functions has become increasingly scarce in people's normal daily routine. One

now travels to a supermarket, not to separate fruit and vegetable stores, butchers, bakers, and general stores. Not only do you buy all your food in one place, you probably do your banking, rent a movie, and pick up some fast food under the same roof. Even boutique stores, that offer specialty items not available elsewhere, as public agencies often do, group together in shopping malls or downtown districts. Many governments still let people travel all over town to handle their requests. One way to provide "one stop shopping is to create a single call center for multiple agencies. The "911" system is one example of a single call center that has met with much success. This was possible by using technology to connect the different agencies together, and by limiting the scope of the center's responsibilities to make the management of the system feasible with the technology available at the time. Since the non-emergency side of government work covers so many diverse and varied activities, the connection between agencies becomes more complex to manage. Even as different governments entities develop a presence on the Internet, there tends to be separate web pages, often accessed through a common front page, which follow established government boundaries. The Internet presence mirrors the organizational practices in place today. At the same time, as private enterprises add more and more functionality to their central portals, the difference between private and government service provision becomes increasingly apparent to the public

Resolution: Since it is not feasible, nor desirable, to create a single government organization that can be the single source of answers to all public concerns, it is necessary for the different government entities to collaborate in their public access activities. Using new Constituent (Customer) Relationship Management Systems such as the mySAP CRM solution one can track requests and interests from all public contacts, and be able to access this information for a variety of uses, Inward facing portals such as the mySAP Workplace can access information from multiple systems, such that the employee can access pertinent information, and enter requests on a variety of issues in one place. Knowledge Management Systems can give the employee up to the minute information on current issues, and scripted questions can assist the employee to obtain needed information.

This same portal technology can also provide durect constituent access from home, work, public libraries, schools and local activity centers. Telephone access by voice-enabled versions of the portals is rapidly becoming feasible. Portals such as the mySAP External Portal Solution can put many functions of government together in one place. Multiple systems running in various locations can be connected together to appear to be a single system. Using single sign-on technology the constituent can identify themselves only once to the system, and then have access to all of the systems. The basic information such as name, address, and phone numbers can be entered one time and then automatically passed to each system so that forms can be filled out automatically. Thus the forms from multiple government agencies can be completed simultaneously, with the constituent seeing only one form, and each government agency getting all of their requested information in the format they need it in for their systems. Drag and drop functionality allows information from one connected system to be transferred to another. For instance a tax ID number on a business permit application can be dragged into the sales tax application to give a tax payment history summary on that business, or the address of a

community service center can be dragged into a map program to produce a map of the area.

Using a common portal a new business could register with the City, County, and State agencies to pay their business taxes, income taxes, health permit fees, etc. all at the same time. Or an individual at retirement can apply for veteran benefits, social security and a fishing license all in one spot. These portals can be role-based, which means that if I sign up as a business owner, the information I see is different than what is presented to a retiree, all specialized to meet the constituent's current needs.

The Public Wants Low Taxes

They expect to receive a high level of service for the lowest possible price. This is a reasonable request that has been addressed over the years. Many times improvements in the efficiency of work have been found. Unfortunately, often the costs savings create problems in service delivery. These service needs create the need for improvements in service, which increase costs. A sort of pendulum effect occurs, where things change from better service, more expensive to less expensive lower service. Occasionally major changes occur that raise the overall level of the pendulum. Often the cost versus service tradeoff involves lowering costs by reducing duplication and centralizing operations. However, these centralized services are less susceptible to local demands, and thus service levels, real or perceived, tend to drop. The decentralization that follows increases costs, which later become a natural target when cost reductions are needed.

Collaboration between local entities presents a solution to this cycle. By sharing resources, much of the extra costs of local operation can be reduced, while allowing the decision making to remain local. There have been attempts to make this type of arrangement work in the past, with varying degrees of success. Fire Departments in their mutual aid agreements have created a situation where each jurisdiction, by having additional resources available to them, do not need to invest in the people and equipment needed to handle all possible situations. This can be more difficult to handle in the more undefined handling of day-to-day needs. A recent notable success is the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT)[1]. Their Agility Program encourages the trading of services between the Department of Transportation and local government entities. For example, a local fire department cleans bridge drains in their district using their water tankers, and PennDOT clears snow from their facility. In each case they are trading something that they have the right equipment and people for, in trade for something that they are not properly equipped to do.

Many times these collaborative efforts do not succeed or are attempted due to the difficulty of managing the programs or due to other restrictions. For example certain types of funding require careful documentation of expenditures to prove they were properly spent. In order to share resources it is necessary that all of the proper accounting rules be followed. This has led to not sharing, rather than handling the documentation needed.

[1] Presentation by Bradford Mallory, Secretary of Transportation, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania at the Transportation Research Board Annual Meeting, Washington DC, January 2001.

Another deterrent to successful long term sharing of resources is human nature. Normally, access to resources is through an individual who has numerous other responsibilities. This person controls the resource because it is critical for their assigned responsibilities. When collaboration agreements are made, these employees understand the desire to participate in the program, and want to make it work. However, these employees are typically rewarded for getting the job done, and receive negative feedback when it isn't done. After a few experiences when problems with sharing of resources occur, and the supervisor gets negative feedback, their willingness to let resources out of their control diminishes.

Another form of collaboration between governments is benchmarking, which compares the success of similar programs in different organizations. This is a method used to improve services and lower costs. Operations in one organization can be compared, and metrics developed to measure the relative efficiency and effectiveness of the organizations. Functional comparisons are then made to understand why results differ between jurisdictions. There has been considerable cooperation between governments in developing these benchmarks, and a number of professional organizations have programs to develop their usage. One failing of benchmarking is that it represents conditions at a single point in time. Most programs only recalculate their measures on an annual basis or less often. Thus information on differing trends cannot be used to make comparisons, and identify potential improvements in the near term.

Resolution: E-government solutions can help improve government efficiency and effectiveness by automating many of the time consuming processes that occur between agencies, while providing measurements to assess the success of the program. These measurements can also be used to provide feedback to those directly involved with the implementation of the sharing processes, and to evaluate their performance on maximizing resource usage.

Communication between governments can take many different forms. Marketplaces can be used to automatically offer, and procure surplus resources, such as labor and materials. Agreements for the sharing of seldom used materials or equipment can be implemented by listing these items as available through a central marketplace. When needed, the materials or equipment can be secured for use. All of the participants in the market place have continuous access to view inventory levels within the exchange. By connecting to back end systems, the availability and need for these resources can be scheduled and reserved for use. The costs for the materials can be charged to the proper organization and fund accounting can be maintained. The marketplace keeps full records on all transactions. These functions and more are available through the joint solutions offered by SAP Markets and Commerce One.

Agreements for cooperative work arrangements, such as agencies sharing an administrative function, or having work done by one agency for another, can be handled without human intervention. Work requests can be transmitted over the Internet between agencies, and each agency can then monitor service performed for others, or by others for

them. With the proper systems, the availability of resources can be scheduled for internal operations, and when not needed made available for reservation by others without human intervention The operational users just work in their own systems, reserving needed resources as needed to complete work schedules. All of the trading and accounting for resources happens automatically in the background based on pre-established rules.. The goals of the organization for collaboration, and for resource utilization can be defined and monitored using Balanced Scorecard methodologies as available through systems such as mySAP Strategic Enterprise Management.

The monitoring of benchmark measures can be accomplished with a business information system such as the mySAP Business Warehouse. Information from back end systems can be combined with legacy system information and other information available through the Internet. Information from other jurisdictions can automatically be accessed and compared so that trends in different organizations can be compared.

Additional collaboration opportunity is between governments cooperating on, or reviewing plans of others. Rather than the current practice of sending plans at specified points of the design process to numerous involved parties, the plans can be placed in a collaborative workplace, where the comments of all or some parties can be made available to all others. Work on the plans can then proceed with the continuous cooperation of all reviewing and funding parties. This way problems and conflicts can be dealt with early in the design stages, rather than later, when considerable investment in one approach has already been made.

The Public Wants to be Included in the Decision Making Process

Polls have shown that many citizens do not feel included in government decision-making, and that they are concerned about the influence of special interests[2]. Concerns are expressed that laws are made, permits issued, projects selected and budgets approved without the participation of members of the public. There is the perception that decisions are made behind closed doors, and that "special interests" and their lobbyists unduly influence all of the important decisions. When considering actions, it is not unusual for elected officials to hear accusations of failure to notify, or consult with groups or individuals. The actual history of who was involved, notified or participated in what, and when is often in dispute.

Individual constituents have interests that they want to be involved in, and others that they do not want to bothered with. Current methods of notifying and involving people do not seem to satisfy much of the populace.

Resolution: Constituent Relationship Management systems such as the mySAP Customer Relation Management allows all phases of the government to see each constituent as an entity. All contacts with this person, whether by mail, phone, e-mail, web access, or internal systems are "attached" to this entity. The constituent may have one or many roles, and connections to organizations. For instance, you may be a business owner, a member of a community group, receiving certain benefits, and the parent of

[2] "People's Chief Concerns", Public Agenda Online Website, www.publicagenda.org/issues/

child in a recreational program. If a government agency wants to contact anyone interested in a certain program, or members of all community groups, etc., a contact list is easily available.

Once you have a contact list of interested parties, an invitation to participate a process can be sent. A this point collaborative processes, such as those borrowed from the private sector systems such as the mySAP Product Lifecycle Management solution can be used. This allows joint work on proposed solutions. All of the involved parties become partners in the process. As partners they are able to follow and comment on proposals as they are released, and if desired, each partner can view the comments of others. This allows solutions to grow considering all of the players' views. The system also keeps a full record of all times the material is viewed, as well as all comments made so that there is no question as to who participated, and what there contributions were.

Conclusion

From these examples it is clear that the new e-government tools will allow more and collaboration. The new tools enhance collaboration, and will allow increased emphasis on governments working together and with businesses, and their constituents in the future. This collaboration will not change government overnight, but it is important that governments start looking at the current information systems so that they are well positioned to use these tools in the future. In order to benefit from these opportunities, it is necessary to have good information, and good systems to keep this information. These systems do not replace the need for the political will to exist among elected and top administrative leaders to have the vision to create collaborative solutions that benefit the public.