

Government Online: Improving Service and Engaging Communities

CONSTANCE CLEM



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is published by Ark Group



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ISBN: 978-1-906355-82-1

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Executive summary

MORE QUICKLY than ever before, government in the 21st century must adapt to a rapidly changing technological environment. The underpinnings of modern government operation have long since migrated to computers and databases. Most governments and their agencies have developed at least a basic presence on the World Wide Web. But the critical environmental change affecting government today is the vastly greater access to computers and mobile communications devices enjoyed by the citizens and residents these agencies serve.

As technologies change, attitudes are changing. Business is maximising its ability to deliver goods and services online, and government must not get too far behind. Internet purchasing is one indicator: online consumer spending in the United States was expected to increase by 11 per cent in 2009,¹ and online sales in Europe have been predicted to jump by 20 per cent in 2010.²

It's all about information: wider and faster access to information, transparency of information about government operations, multi-directional exchange of information between government entities and those served, and new inclusiveness in who can tap into and use government information.

As information flows faster and farther, a new era of efficiency is arriving. The effects will be seen in the internal functions within an agency and within government more broadly as agencies maximise collaborative opportunities.

What opportunities does this cultural shift present for government, both broadly and in individual agencies? How can agencies recognise and leverage the potentials for improving public service, creating new efficiencies and cutting costs? What can be achieved through partnerships among agencies, between agencies and private or non-profit organisations, and between government and the public? What strategies can agency leadership use to develop a new vision and implement that plan in a straightforward and practical way? These challenges are the focus of this document.

Collaborative government visionary Beth Simone Noveck observes that as the concept of cyberspace has receded into the background as a ubiquitous feature of modern life, "[t]he future of governance in the digital age is not simply a descriptive inquiry but also a normative opportunity to change those institutions."³

Agencies with a strategic view will take advantage of the opportunities in this new era for citizen engagement and responsive, cost-effective government. They will create new ways to function in a collaborative and service-oriented manner. They will create service and process efficiencies to deliver on their existing role, and they may also add new capabilities that capitalise on the knowledge and input of citizens, residents and allied organisations. This is a very promising moment, but not one that all agencies will confront fearlessly.

The process of delivering new forms of online government is multi-faceted. It begins with understanding the environment in which the organisation operates (discussed in Chapter 1) and taking stock of current conditions and service gaps (Chapter 2). The next step is conceptualising the specific capabilities and priorities that define the overall direction for website redevelopment. Chapter 3 discusses how to approach change by framing and articulating the agency's intention and goals and by analysing the options for getting there.

Having committed to a course of action, agencies then will engage the process, doing the detailed work in behind-the-scenes technology and the public interface. It is essential to design for the future: to base services and functions on the platforms, architecture, data structures and standards that will harness the agency's content and intellectual contributions for ongoing use rather than a dead end. It is also paramount that the design and development process put the user front and centre, to facilitate their interactions with government and to make those interactions professional, positive and effective. Strategies for making it happen are shared in Chapter 4.

Agency responsiveness is more important than ever. Web-supported government processes and human-delivered processes need to be combined, or recombined, in a suitable balance. Mobile device access and citizen consultation are two trending ways the public expects to interact with government for real-time give and take. Chapter 5 gives special attention to the opportunities that are emerging through 'Government 2.0' and its use of online social media.

Preparing for the launch of new websites and new online services means articulating changes in policy, process and roles to keep the staff comfortable with change.

Deft change management is essential throughout implementation and into the transition phase. And, while certain segments of the public are likely to have leapt ahead technologically, other groups still remain uncomfortable with new technology or unable to access it – and leadership must ensure these people are not left behind. Chapter 6 outlines considerations for helping keep the go-live on an even keel and assuring a connection with the public.

The work is challenging, and the rewards immense: in better service, in more effective public interaction, in more positive perception of government by those it serves. It all begins with setting the vision and performance goals for the organisation and relying on that vision to guide the organisation toward its goal of effective service and citizen engagement.

Government agencies everywhere are creating innovation in their online service plans. Case studies in this document highlight the experiences of selected agencies and share key factors in their achievements.

And what lies ahead? On the horizon are potentials in the semantic web, point-and-click government, greater reliance on mobile devices, and other developments whose impacts are difficult to predict. E-government has its 'known unknowns' and 'unknown unknowns' – the wildcards in the technology and events of the future. The best way forward is to understand where agencies stand, to be aware of what surrounds them, and to maintain the agility to respond to what emerges.

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About the author

CONSTANCE CLEM, principal of Clem Information Strategies, is a researcher, writer and communications adviser with a background in public policy and government services. She is expert in assessing information needs within organisations and their stakeholder spheres and helping clients achieve greater effectiveness in their communications.

Connie assists clients with strategic planning, website and social media consulting, stakeholder education, grant writing and editorial services. Connie is a speaker on government use of social media for public engagement. She also provides specialised research on a variety of topics. Much of her work focuses on public sector operations and government information, in such areas as public safety, human services, training and technology. Her 2009 analysis of cost containment strategies in county jails was recently published by *American Jails* magazine.

Before launching Clem Information Strategies, Connie was the senior communications specialist with the US Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections (NIC) Information Center in Boulder and Longmont, Colorado, USA. She launched NIC's website, managed professional networks, conducted research for purposes ranging from needs assessment to policy analysis, and edited professional journals. In her early career she worked on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC in the US Senate and in the Office of Technology Assessment, a division of the Library of Congress.

Connie received the 2009 President's Award from the Association of Independent Information Professionals (AIIP) for revamping the organisation's website. She is a member of the Special Libraries Association (SLA), currently serving as a director of SLA's Rocky Mountain Chapter and with the Web 2.0 team for SLA's Government Information Division. Connie is a member of the editorial board of the American Jail Association and is active in other organisations.

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Acknowledgements

THE AUTHOR would like to thank the professionals who contributed their enthusiasm and expertise to this report by providing case study material. Their vision, creativity, persistence and pride in their work was a pleasure to encounter and to share with readers. Specific thanks are due to Tina Iversen in Gentofte Kommune, Denmark; Emily Hines Seibert in Virginia, USA; Steve Elliott in Boulder County Colorado, USA; and Steve Moore in Larimer County Colorado, USA. Tim Turner in Australia produced two pieces in a remarkably short time and gets special kudos for his contributions. Finally, commissioning editor Anna Shaw was consistently helpful in supporting the development of the report. To each of you, my sincerest appreciation.

Constance Clem
March 2010