

E-government takes work, but there are some tested strategies that can help. The following critical success factors are crucial when planning, developing, and implementing new information technology initiatives in government.

Rally leadership

Leadership is imperative in a successful e-government project-and leaders are the people who pull the initiative together, establish it as a priority, and steer it toward a successful completion. Day-to-day e-government leadership often comes from the person with the drive and a personal appreciation for how technology can transform service delivery. Internal e-government champions often don't hold formal leadership titles, but they are able to find ways to get people involved and at the planning table.

Learn from other local governments

Gather information on what other local governments are doing electronically, what technologies they are using, and the problems they faced as they integrated it with their business along the way. Ask your colleagues and vendors who else is using the product that you are looking for, then seek those people out and establish information-sharing relationships. Ask questions and gather as much information as possible. Up-front research and information gathering will help you plan a technology solution that has both immediate and long-lasting payoffs.

Get the right people at the table

The decision makers, users, and managers who have a stake in the project can provide the different points of view that will ensure a system that delivers real benefits. Whether through formal group meetings or informal one-on-one conversations, getting these players involved is necessary to engender trust and to anchor the project within the organization. The up-front investment of time is well worth the effort over the long run. In one town, a board member pulled together people from his own town and from the neighboring village to set up a technology committee. This committee was able to secure money and support for the joint town/village Web site through a collaborative intergovernmental planning committee. The committee went on to have other technology discussions and has used this structure to help shape all its e-government projects.

Develop successful vendor relationships

Working well with a vendor requires a well-structured contract, trust, and ongoing relationship management. It requires the local government to be a critical and informed customer. It starts with understanding the transaction. You are in the business of serving your citizens. Vendors are in the business of selling information, equipment, and services. These can be compatible, but they are not the same. When developing a contract with a vendor, make sure that you remain in control of the focus, size, and cost of the project and build in penalties for failures to meet specified requirements. Remember to account for and incorporate training and maintenance needs. Ask the vendor for a custom demo using data and processes from your locality so you can see how it will work under the unique conditions of your environment. Doing these things at the start provides an agreed-upon structure for managing an ongoing successful relationship.

Acknowledge political differences

Bridging political differences is never easy and sometimes not even possible, but acknowledging them is essential for understanding how to move forward with e-government. In one town, political opposition on a town board prevented a newly elected supervisor from getting the funding and support to launch a Web site. Another town focused on the collective benefits of having a joint town/village Web site and overcame political barriers.

Share information constantly and consistently

Consistently share information about e-government initiatives through ongoing project updates with staff, department heads, officials, board members, and constituents. In one town, a board member worked closely with

the leaders of the town's departments on a town-wide telecommunications plan. Since each department was interested in getting Internet access and improving phone service, looking at the town's overall telecommunications strategy was the best way to approach the situation. The board member then set up regular meetings with the staff, fellow board members, elected officials, and community representatives to discuss the plan and gather feedback. Through these regular meetings and open discussions departments were able to participate in the planning, development, and implementation of a new townwide resource.

Create innovative partnerships

Finding new partners and establishing new ways of working with other governments can help e-government initiatives develop. When one county was in the market for a document imaging system for deeds and mortgages, instead of going with a private sector company they contracted with a neighboring county that had already developed such a system. This partnership is complicated because it's breaking new ground on a number of levels. The partnership requires the active involvement of attorneys from both counties and the careful crafting of an inter-municipal agreement limiting liability. Still, both counties are committed to the partnership whose benefits include tremendous cost savings due to buying from another government and not having to reinvent the wheel.

Balance the right to privacy with the right to know

Local governments collect and store potentially sensitive personal information in many forms such as police reports, divorce proceedings, and property records. Although much of this information is accessible through the Freedom of Information Law, privacy concerns emerge because the Internet offers such easy access to it. For example, one local government official said Internet accessible property images posed a potential threat to law enforcement officers. The locality had to review and adapt their information policies to strike a balance that ensured an individual's right to privacy and the public's right to easily access that person's property information.