

Collaboration and Information Sharing: Two Critical Capabilities for Government

Information is one of the most valuable resources of government. Government managers, however, are finding that the information needed to plan, make decisions, and act is often held outside their own organizations, collected for widely different purposes, and maintained in disparate formats. As a consequence, governments around the world are increasingly turning to information sharing as a strategy for maximizing the value of information in providing services and responding to problems. New practices are emerging at all levels; from town governments creating performance-based management capability by sharing information between departments such as police and highway, to state-level efforts to coordinate public safety practices, to national efforts responding to public health crises.

Information sharing allows government managers to work at the same time, with the same information integrated from multiple disparate sources. It has the potential to support the transformation of organizational structures and communication channels among multiple agencies working in different locations. These integration processes often involve new work processes and significant organizational change. They are also embedded in larger political and institutional environments that shape their goals and circumscribe their choices.

Examinations of the World Trade Center attack and Hurricane Katrina responses provide compelling arguments for making changes to create capability for sustainable information sharing programs. Both events highlight the value and difficulty of sharing knowledge and information among individuals, professions, organizations, and governments in times of crisis. These events underscore the need for robust and resilient government response capabilities and provide a mandate for significant changes to ensure that cross-boundary information sharing is not only possible, but useful.

Public health and safety professionals, in particular, appreciate the need for this capability both in times of crisis and under normal circumstances. The US Department of Justice (DOJ) has long been a leader in encouraging and supporting cross-boundary collaboration and information sharing in the formation of enterprisewide criminal justice information integration between and among federal, state, and local justice agencies. Information sharing, according to Domingo Herraiz, director of the Bureau of Justice Assistance in the DOJ's Office of Justice Programs, is the "cross-cutting prevention piece" that will allow communities to reduce crime and fight terrorism.

Trust and Cross-boundary Information Sharing Trust building is an important social process for developing cross-boundary information sharing among organizations and individuals. The level of trust among participating organizations is particularly relevant to information sharing efforts because it can alleviate conflicts and ease the way for collaboration in the form of risk taking, knowledge sharing, and decision making. A high level of trust can contribute to full participation in the project and knowledge sharing about complex business processes and practices. The combination, and more importantly, the interaction of leadership, organizational culture, and formal structures to support knowledge sharing and cooperation over time can ease the way for trust development.

Knowledge and Information-sharing Networks Knowledge and information-sharing networks are emerging in an increasing number of government programs and policy arenas. These interorganizational and intergovernmental networks facilitate cross-program and cross-functional coordination and support communities of practice. They often include shared repositories of detailed program or administrative information, accessible to all participants, that can address such needs as program evaluation, reference services, or technical assistance. Findings from CTG's research show that formal authority, perceived authority, and a variety of leadership behaviors appear to have important influence on the development and performance of public sector knowledge networks. These factors also affect the ability of such a network to achieve its substantive goals and the degree to which the effort provides satisfying and useful networking relationships among the participating organizations and individuals.

Events such as the 2002 emergence of the West Nile Virus (WNV) in the US and its spread across the country since then, have shown that gathering, handling, and sharing information in response to a public health crisis, requires not only adequate technical capabilities for sharing information across organizational boundaries and among multiple levels of government, but reliance on strong interorganizational collaboration skills. The WNV response required collaboration and information sharing among animal and human public health professionals, as well as healthcare facilities that spanned state, local, and federal jurisdictions, all of whom were unaccustomed to working together across traditional organizational boundaries. Together they faced challenges such as data and technical incompatibility, the lack of institutional incentives to collaborate, and power struggles around multi-organizational settings in government.

Understanding the factors influencing information sharing and collaboration in solving pressing public problems is a focus of attention for digital government practitioners and researchers alike. Ongoing research at CTG is exploring many of these factors and providing both new guidance for practitioners and new models of understanding for researchers. For example, trust building has been identified as an important social process for developing cross-boundary information sharing among organizations and individuals. Given the critical role trust plays in fostering collaboration and allowing the development of enterprisewide integrated information resources, practitioners planning new cross-boundary information sharing initiatives must explicitly include resources for trust building among information sharing partners. Leadership characteristics and authority strategies are also significant in creating and sustaining collaborative efforts across organizational boundaries. New guidance built on this research provides practical advice to leaders on how to create information sharing capability in government.

Future work at CTG will continue to focus on cross-boundary collaboration and information sharing efforts through a National Science Foundation grant supporting the use of a national survey to test a new model of cross-boundary information integration. In addition, CTG is partnering with others through a new grant to create a North American Digital Government Working Group focused on cross boundary information sharing and collaboration. Both of these efforts provide CTG and our partners opportunities to explore the key questions about maximizing the value of information assets held by government and to contribute to theoretical discussions about information sharing and collaboration as important social phenomena.

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Sharing Justice Information: A Capability Assessment Toolkit The justice enterprise faces many performance challenges that can be addressed more successfully through better information-sharing initiatives. These challenges differ widely in their scope and complexity. Regardless of their size, all these initiatives are made less difficult when participating organizations have high levels of information-sharing capability. Therefore, decisions to invest in information sharing initiatives must be grounded in a full understanding of the ability of those involved to identify and fill the gaps between current and required capability. This toolkit is designed for justice professionals to use when considering or planning for a justice information-sharing initiative. It provides a process for assessing where capability for information sharing exists and where it must be developed in order to achieve public safety goals. Assessment results provide a basis for action planning to fill capability gaps both within and across organizations. This is a self-assessment tool, based on the idea that the persons involved in an information-sharing initiative are best equipped, by their knowledge and experience, to make judgments and supply evidence about these capabilities. The toolkit was designed to facilitate discussion within individual organizations as well as across organizations involved in an information-sharing initiative. Download a copy at www.ctg.albany.edu.