



Lessons in Intergovernmental IT Governance

Pi2's mission is to champion the cause of intergovernmental action by providing concrete opportunities for all levels of government to work collaboratively toward systems, services, and practices that treat the public sector as an integrated enterprise.

The Workshop

A July 2004 Workshop on Intergovernmental IT Governance represented a practical way to address this mission, as well as Pi2's vision of a 21st century government that embraces intergovernmental collaboration, innovative solutions, seamless operations, and services for the benefit of constituents.

The purpose of the workshop was to draw general lessons in intergovernmental IT governance from the practical experiences of people and projects across the US, and to consider how to extend these lessons into future initiatives.

During the event, five experts shared their experiences, based either on long careers in intergovernmental work or on specific projects that are currently crossing governmental boundaries. In each case, the experts addressed motivation and goals for intergovernmental initiatives, the roles of various participants, the scope and outcomes of their efforts, governance principles, challenges, and critical success factors and lessons learned.

Following each speaker, the participants discussed the topics and issues that had been introduced. The workshop concluded with a general discussion of intergovernmental governance and produced a set of lessons that can be used to improve the design, operation and effectiveness of these complex but essential public sector initiatives.

Bob Wood, Topside Consulting Group, LLC.

Bob reflected on the governance issues that emerge as the public sector tries to combine efforts across organizational boundaries. Drawing on his experiences at the Federal Aviation Administration and Veterans Administration, Bob discussed issues such as who decides whether information protection is more important than the quality of citizen services, or how agencies will share funding or delegate decision-making. He also made observations about how the largest program in any department strongly influences the whole agency's work as well as its IT strategy. He noted that both consensus and command and control methods of management are appropriate – but in different settings. Consensus makes sense at the policy level, but in field operations quick and clear authority are needed to generate better performance. Bob discussed how IT governance is made up of principles, processes, and levels of trust that either exist or must be created. Without these ingredients, governance will be ineffective or nonexistent.

Jim Flyzik, Guerra, Kiviat, Flyzik and Associates, Inc

Jim discussed a variety of experiences in interagency initiatives from the Treasury Communications System to the immediate aftermath of 9/11. He described how governance

and culture are major barriers to enterprise approaches or government-wide activities and outlined the governance model and strategies used to overcome these barriers at Treasury. Using the Treasury Communication System as an example, he described this early 1990's effort to build an enterprise network that consolidated long distance data communications for 14 bureaus with diverse missions. Key features of the strategy included top-level leadership, giving individual bureaus responsibility for agency-wide functions, forming an internal IT board to represent all bureau's views, and a working capital fund to make key investments. Such changes go against the grain of long tradition and strong disincentives and therefore require ongoing leadership attention and considerable time -- the process has been unfolding for more than ten years.

Bill Burgess, National States Geographic Information Council

Bill gave an overview of *The National Map* Partnership Project that includes the National States Geographic Information Council (NSGIC), the National Association of Counties (NACo) and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). The Partnership Project is designed to increase the participation of state and local government agencies in *The National Map* program by providing them with accurate information, offering best practices models, developing implementation plans tailored to the unique characteristics of each state, and establishing appropriate communication and feedback mechanisms for all stakeholder groups. Challenges stem from the wide variety and variability of state and local governments, the need to demonstrate a clear business case for working beyond ones own political boundaries, and the need for incentives and culture change, as well as time and resource constraints. For more information: <http://nationalmap.usgs.gov/partnerships.html>

Lori Bame, Washington Statewide Information Coordination Consortium

Lori discussed the Washington Statewide Information Coordination Consortium. The Consortium is a cross-governmental partnership of state and local agencies interested in improving information about government in Washington State for citizens and policy makers. The Consortium also facilitates coordination of data, technology, people, and other elements necessary to create useful, meaningful, and seamless information about government. A key objective of the Consortium is to enable cross-governmental coordination efforts to be more successful by breaking down barriers that impede their sustainability (such as funding streams, ownership, decision making, and other governance issues). Its key features include both legislative and executive participation, business involvement, biennial goals, and plain language and common sense communication about the issues that concern citizens and political leaders. The biggest challenge for the Consortium is sustainability given its voluntary, multi-organizational, and mixed funding characteristics. For more information: <http://swicc.leg.wa.gov/swicc>

Meghan Cook, Center for Technology in Government

Meghan presented the results of the New York State-Local Internet Gateway Prototype Project. The 21-month Gateway project involved eight state agencies and 30 local governments in a collaborative effort to build, test, and evaluate policy, management, and technical mechanisms for government to government (G2G) business relationships in New York State. The results included a Web-based portal, three re-designed business applications, role-based security, and new data management principles. Key challenges included wide variation in local needs and capabilities, lack of IT and program coordination across state agencies, and data quality and ownership problems. The project highlights the importance of peer-to-peer relationships, business process thinking, special project management skills, and the adoption of enterprise principles. For more information:

<http://www.ctg.albany.edu/projects/lg2?proj=lg2&sub=summary>

Lessons for Intergovernmental IT Governance

Together, the presentations and the discussions generated lessons in intergovernmental IT governance that go far beyond information technology per se. NN themes captured the essence of the day:

“We need more conversations”

The relationships crucial to intergovernmental work are much more than the lines on organizations charts. The kind of relationships that can lead to successful cross-boundary work depend on human interaction that might be most accurately characterized as “conversation.” These relationships entail open communication about mutual and separate goals, needs, issues, and contexts. The conversation takes the form of fact-gathering, debate, mentoring, story-telling, and advocacy for different approaches and solutions. These conversations acknowledge that intergovernmental work is exceedingly difficult and complex. It takes both commitment and time to understand all its dimensions. Conversations like these help to avoid tunnel vision and over-simplification while opening the door to a wider variety of realistic alternative approaches. Conversation is where trust forms, where collaboration begins and where the difficulties of collaboration can be tackled and overcome. It also helps to differentiate those activities that are best governed by consensus (such as agreement on principles and goals) from those that work best with a more traditional command and control structure (such as daily operations where well-defined, quick actions are needed)

“It takes more than one kind of leadership”

Political leadership of cross-boundary work lays a foundation of legitimacy but by itself does not remove real barriers to resource and information sharing. Neither does it lessen the responsibilities of agencies to attend to their individual missions while adding intergovernmental activities to already stretched agendas. Experienced people recommended finding the elected and appointed leaders who want to be associated the leading edge of government reform and supporting them with education about both the promise and the challenges of intergovernmental work. This could take the form of common sense stories about how intergovernmental work can lead to positive results for citizens, businesses, and communities.

At the same time, project-level leadership is needed and most recommend that this be vested in program or functional staff. Their natural focus on programmatic and human outcomes makes a big difference in the ability to make a case to obtain and sustain the authority and resources to do the work. At the same time, CIOs also have essential leadership responsibilities that begin with the commitment to put IT to work for the mission and to demonstrate that commitment by promoting collaboration with business units and among senior leadership.

Leadership roles are also needed in the different organizations who participate in order to lend needed expert knowledge and maintain the support of their own executives. These organizations are not all inside the executive branch, or even inside the government. Leadership by legislators, the business community, and civic groups all contribute to the drive for better intergovernmental action.

“Governance and culture issues far outweigh technology and financial issues”

The traditional organization- and program-centric culture of government is a severe barrier to intergovernmental collaboration. The famous “stovepipes” that define programs, funnel resources, and gather data about performance are very difficult to penetrate and most incentives serve to reinforce rather than reduce them. For these reasons, information sharing and interoperability seem to have more promise for than reorganizing agencies. Even so, it takes political will power, ingenuity, patience, and persistence to make even slow progress.

intergovernmental initiatives need to set and widely communicate both near- and long-term goals, and be accountable for achieving them. In addition, a concerted early effort to define and test commitment to basic goals and principles can help the collaborators maintain and apply them when they inevitably encounter problems of governance and traditional incentive structures. Other recommendations included creating a neutral organizational home for cross-boundary initiatives, assigning project leaders and key staff whose only commitment is to the initiative, and providing funding directly to these efforts rather than relying entirely on the contributions of participating organizations.

“It’s not the technology you use, but who you bring to the table”

Clearly, no intergovernmental program can get off the ground or succeed for long without the commitment and deep involvement of stakeholders at every level of government. However, collaboration does not come naturally to organizations and cannot be sustained simply by appealing to the “greater good.” Collaborative projects have to demonstrate real net value to the participants and this requires that their self-interests be understood and addressed. Public sector stakeholders include policy makers, program professionals, and front-line service staff as well as management and technology experts from diverse organizations. Each of these groups will be motivated by different factors ranging from service quality to cost to equity to the potential for innovation. Organizational and jurisdictional imperatives will also have strong influences, especially in terms of the wide variations in state and local economic conditions and political leadership.

Moreover, there is neither enough time nor money for government to do this work alone. Professional associations play important roles in communication, orientation, and education. In addition, they can often broadly represent the interests and concerns of their members, whether individuals, agencies, or units of government. The private sector is essential in most large IT initiatives but we need new “rules of engagement” that make it possible to build lasting public-private relationships and to develop and test new ideas that benefit both sectors. Universities can also contribute through careful research and evaluation, traditional and executive education, and extension services that help disseminate and implement new ideas. All of these non-governmental actors can also give “voice” to the need for investments and long-term support for intergovernmental programs before Congress, legislatures, and the media.

“Think of intergovernmental work as national coverage at local and human scale”

The term “enterprise” is used in a variety of ways. For intergovernmental purposes, it means thinking and acting in ways that tie the levels, units, and organizations of government together for common purposes. Nationwide or statewide consistency, coordination, and interoperability are too difficult to achieve without an overarching purpose to drive the process. That purpose is most often defined as service to citizens, but it might also be support for local government operations or community development. It could be demonstrated in something as obvious (and difficult to orchestrate) as allowing you to change your address – once – whenever you move. The bottom line is that strategies, results, and performance need to be tied to substantive goals that ordinary people want and understand. National programs are not successful if they only work at the level of the federal government. Instead they need to account for a myriad of business processes and perform in ways that make sense and return value to states, local governments, and their residents on their own terms and for their own needs. . .

“We need strategic stewardship of data and systems”

While experts acknowledge that culture, policies, and organizational imperatives are the more difficult barriers, that is not to say that the technical or design aspects of intergovernmental work are simple or easy. These are also strategic concerns. Consider data quality and usability for

example. No intergovernmental effort can succeed without a common understanding across all participants of the meaning and limitations of the information to be shared. Data quality and usability for these efforts rest on extensive and detailed discussions, negotiations and compromises about what information is essential, what it means, how it is collected, shared, used, protected, and maintained over time. These data definition processes take considerable time from expert staff in both program and IT roles. To go beyond information sharing to interoperable systems means developing an enterprise view of lines of business, processes and activities, infrastructures, and systems that can guide decisions that will affect many different programs and organizations. These have to make sense at every scale of the effort from local to state to national. Homeland security, human services, law enforcement, and environmental management are just a few of the areas in which these systems are emerging. For these essential aspects of public life, intergovernmental data and systems need our most thoughtful and careful stewardship.

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