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ELECTRONIC GOVERNMENT: A VISION OF A FUTURE THAT IS ALREADY HERE

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Introduction

If you've never heard the term e-government, you're not alone. In a poll conducted last year for the Council for Excellence in Government, only 34 percent of citizens were familiar with electronic government (e-government). The poll also indicated that 70 percent of Americans think tax dollars should be invested in improving access to government services. n1

Ten years ago many of us didn't have cellular phones, fewer of us had ever been on the Internet, and none of us could have predicted what the words dot com would come to mean. There's no denying it, information technologies - from the Internet and e-mail to database and word processing applications - have changed the way we work and live. Government is no exception. Information technology initiatives, now known as electronic government, are changing the way that the public sector works and interacts with citizens, businesses, and other governments. Predictions are that "government will change more in the next decade than it has in the past" hundred years. n2

E-government impacts the way we interact with government agencies at all levels, whether that interaction takes place through telephone, fax, e-mail, a Web site, or directly into a data base. In

the Northern District of Alabama, the United States Bankruptcy Court provides calendars, opinions, and official bankruptcy forms, all online. Elsewhere, county clerks are beginning to offer electronic online access to records. New technologies are changing the way that law enforcement investigates suspected criminals from tracking e-mails and eavesdropping cellular phone calls. These examples of e-government, and many others, show how IT is changing the way we share information, transact business, and make decisions. Lawyers are among the many professionals impacted by these changes.

I. What is E-Government?

E-government is as varied and complex as government itself. While government is "a dynamic mixture of goals, structures, and functions" that serve multiple and diverse constituencies, electronic government initiatives incorporate technology to improve the way it serves those constituencies. n3

What do people talk about when they talk about e-government?

"Imagine a future in which citizens can log onto one Internet site, easily find the government services they are looking for, and use that site to conduct an
online transaction." n4

"E-government refers to the delivery of government information and services online through the Internet or other digital means." n5

"E-government links people...to the public marketplace of ideas, debate, priorities, initiatives, innovation, services, transactions, and results. It puts ownership of government in the hands of all Americans." n6

"Digital (electronic) government is about transforming government service delivery through the use of technology." n7

These statements may seem like visions of the future but all levels of government are grappling today with how to use electronic technologies to improve services to citizens, increase efficiency, and streamline traditional paper processes. At the federal level, electronic government is being driven by the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 and the Government Paper Elimination Act of 1998. Both laws were designed to reduce the flow of paper throughout the federal government by encouraging increased use of electronic communication and documentation. In New York State, most e-government projects are part of the "Government Without Walls" initiative launched by Governor George Pataki in early 2001.

Technologies like the Internet may be changing the way that governments interact with citizens and businesses, but that's only part of the puzzle. What happens behind the Web site is a fundamental change in the way that government business is being conducted. For example, in New York City, citizens and visitors can log on to the City's Web site at any time, from anywhere to find out if the cafe where they intend to have lunch has had any recent health violations. While this move to the Internet changed the way people can access information about

the places they eat, the process of completing restaurant inspections has changed as well. Public Health Sanitarians now carry around wireless PDAs (personal data assistants) as they inspect food service establishments. When they complete their inspections, they jot their notes into their PDA and send them directly to the department's network information system.

II. E-Government Is a Four-Faceted Vision of the Future

E-Government can be viewed from four distinct perspectives: e-services, e-commerce, e-democracy, and e-management.

A. E-Services and Citizens

E-government opens up many possibilities for innovating and [*1246] improving government services. Many governments are working toward providing citizens with access to information and services 24 hours a day, seven days a week from the convenience of their home or office PC. This requires organizing services by the needs of citizens, rather than by the agencies that provide them. E-government might enable a citizen to access the form they need to fill out to order a copy of their birth certificate without needing to know that the Health Department handles the request. Other services that citizens want online include renewing a driver's license, voting on the Internet, filing taxes, and obtaining park information. n8

B. E-Commerce and Government Transactions

Electronic commerce is the transaction of money for government services, or vice versa, government purchasing. People can pay Federal taxes electronically and many states are following suit by beginning to accept online tax payments. Another example of e-commerce includes a consortium of New York county governments that now purchase their office supplies from an electronic catalog over the Internet and receive them the next day.

Other forms of government e-commerce underway include online auctions of surplus equipment, renewing automobile registrations, and booking sites at public campgrounds. Processing these transactions electronically may create a more efficient and cost effective method than the traditional paper processes.

C. E-Democracy and Public Participation

E-democracy is the political and public participation side of the electronic revolution. It refers to activities that increase citizen involvement including electronic voting, virtual town hall meetings, cyber campaigns, feedback polls, public surveys, community forums, and access to meeting agendas and minutes.

In the Town of South Bristol, N. Y., board members surveyed citizens to ask them whether or not they wanted to build a new firehouse. While the over 30 -percent return was perfectly acceptable, the board followed the survey with a community e-mail outreach effort that invited feedback on the issue. The responding electronic discussion increased and sustained public participation in the decision process and kept the issue on the community's radar.

D. E-Management and Government Efficiency

E-management refers to the behind the scenes information systems that support the full range of management and administrative functions of a government agency, including integrating data across agencies and governments, maintaining electronic public records and digital libraries, and developing new forms of organizations and working groups. For example, to develop the prototype for the state's new Web portal, a workgroup of physically dispersed state agency representatives used e-mail to communicate and test the bulk of their work. As government continues to work across traditional boundaries, both physical and organizational, e-management will play a greater role in public sector business.

III. E-Government Is Already Changing the Way Government Works

A. Changing the Interface Between Government, Citizens, and Businesses

Providing access to government information is the most common example of [electronic] government. n9 The benefits for citizens, businesses, and the public sector include reducing printing and mailing costs for collecting and disseminating information, expanding access from regular business hours to around the clock, and making it easier to keep information accurate and up-to-date.

Web sites are the most common vehicle for providing electronic access to public information. According to some estimates, there have been more than 10,000 government Web sites developed in the United States to date. n10 These include the full array of federal, state, and local governments. Typically, these sites provide basic information such as the names of government officials, agency addresses and phone numbers, online publications, e-mail addresses, as well as other things pertinent to that particular government entity.

Telephone systems like 311 customer relationship management [*1248] applications are also being implemented in many public sector organizations as a way to efficiently track and answer incoming requests for information and services. In Lynchburg, Va., a number of citizen phone calls about illegal drinking and drug activity went to different city departments, which responded independently or not at all. This prompted officials to revamp the way the city handles citizen complaints and requests. Now they have a centralized office that answers all incoming calls from residents. Trained representatives direct calls to appropriate departments and tell citizens how long it will take to fix a problem. n11

The newest interfaces between government, citizens, and business are Web portals, which provide a centralized point of access to government information and services across different agencies. The federal government's Firstgov Web site and the New York State homepage both operate under the portal concept by providing access to agencies, departments, and organizations across government through one site.

B. Changing the Way Work Gets Done in Government

The gradual transformation of government business is taking place on many levels. When government began implementing information systems to manage their information, they developed them on an agency-by-agency, or program-by-program basis. Each agency built their own system for a specific agency or program purpose, not to be connected across the agency or government to other systems. This phenomena has become known as the silo or stovepipe approach because the business and systems is viewed up and down and not across. One of the visions of e-government is to break down these silos, integrating business processes, service programs, and streamlining information management.

Many times the best solution to a problem has nothing to do with technology and everything to do with the way work is being done. Business process reengineering often accompanies technological implementation. The words "government bureaucracy" produce the image of paper-laden processes that are both people and time intensive. It may not be efficient, but that's the way we've always done it, is one of the arguments. That was the case when the New York State Department of Motor Vehicles set out to reduce the amount of time it took to process titles. Before investing in a costly document imaging system, the agency conducted a thorough workflow analysis that demonstrated how a 20-step process could be cut by more than half while substantially reducing the process time. n12 While the answer to improving DMV's slow paper process was not electronic government, it was the technology that provided the incentive to examine the process and explore different ways it could be improved.

The e-government vision is a vision of integrated information and services. Information collected by state and local government agencies can be a valuable resource on which to build e-government programs. Thousands of files, databases, and data warehouses have been developed. But they aren't always compatible and in many cases contain duplicate information, which makes sharing and integrating data a great challenge. Besides new business processes, changes in policy, security, and information management are called for to "share information across agency and program boundaries, to discover patterns and interactions once hidden in millions of separate paper records." n13

When New York State's Bureau of Shelter Services in the Office of Disability and Temporary Assistance set out to build a prototype Homeless Information Management System (HIMS) to help government and nonprofit organizations in program planning and decision-making about homeless services in the state, the effectiveness of the prototype relied on the willingness of the necessary parties to share information.

New models of collaboration for achieving e-government are popping up everywhere. In Bremen, Germany, a public-private partnership between city government and private industry works together to provide Web-based services to citizens. The Foundations Project in Minnesota used a multi-agency collaboration to develop a Web site that provides environmental and natural resource data. n14

IV. Some obstacles to realizing the vision, and how to overcome them

E-government promises some striking opportunities to improve the business of government, but this vision is not without a series of real obstacles. Hurdles such as citizen awareness of

electronic services and information, the "digital divide," and an exodus of skilled workers must be overcome to get from where we are today to the vision of e-government. According to a study conducted by Brown University, "Government Web sites are not making full use of available technology, and there are problems in terms of access and democratic outreach." n15 Overcoming these obstacles will take a special kind of leadership that is eager to get involved and initiate change.

People can't participate in electronic government if they don't know it's there. While 84 percent of government officials said the Internet has improved their outreach to citizens, only 34 percent of citizens are somewhat familiar with e-government, according to a Hart-Teeter poll conducted for the Council for Excellence in Government last November. That number is only a slight increase from the 29 percent who were familiar with e-government the year before. This lack of awareness must be addressed for the benefits of e-government to be realized.

The citizens who need government services most are also those without ready access to the Internet. A gap, commonly known as the "digital divide," exists between those households that have access to the Internet and online services and those that do not. E-government services are ineffective when citizens don't have the necessary computers and Internet connections to use online information and services.

Skilled workers are either aging out or opting out of government. The brain drain of highly skilled government IT workers is a concern on many levels. According to civic.com, a Council of State Government poll said that 47 of 50 states reported a shortage of IT workers. Experienced people who have worked with an agency's technology systems for the past decade or two are retiring or leaving for better pay in the private sector. Competition between government and private companies for new graduates with new skills and for seasoned professionals with deep experience continues to be a challenge.

Overcoming these obstacles requires committed leadership to provide the direction and political will necessary to promote change. "To be an effective leader in our networked world, you need to engage IT issues. You need to play a key role in establishing strategic direction, implementing specific projects, and formulating new public policies," according to a report from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. n16

An example of this leadership is Tom Ridge's recent call for an increased focus on integrating information across all levels of law enforcement. As the Director of Homeland Security, Ridge says he wants to do away with the turf battles that have historically pitted policing agencies against one another. n17 Sustaining this effort, or sustaining any other e-government initiative, will take ongoing and committed leadership.

Whether we like it or not, information technology and electronic government initiatives are transforming the public sector. Change is in the air. The government that serves our children and grandchildren will be much different than the one that served our parents. Just how different is impossible to predict, but the countless e-government projects underway today provide many clues.

Appendix: Other Resources

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