
UNDERSTANDING NEW MODELS OF COLLABORATION FOR DELIVERING GOVERNMENT SERVICES

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In the last decade, countries all over the globe have sought to deliver public services through new working relationships among governments and private and nonprofit organizations. The defining characteristic of these collaborations is the voluntary combination of separate organizations into a coherent service delivery system supported by advanced IT. The rapid evolution of these technologies has created important new opportunities for governments to redesign services through collaboration.



two-year project carried out by an international network of field researchers in the U.S., Canada, and Europe (Table 1) is summarized here. The teams are conducting case studies in their respective countries using a consistent method of data collection and analysis. The goal is to understand what fundamental elements of this worldwide phenomenon transcend cultural and national boundaries. For each case, the researchers review formal and informal documentation and interview 8–12 individuals who represent the various partners and the customers of their services. The interviews are taped, and the notes are transcribed, coded, and analyzed according to a standard scheme that reflects a preliminary model of the collaboration process.

We define collaboration as: “A reciprocal and voluntary agreement between two or more distinct public sector agencies, or between public and private or nonprofit entities, to deliver government services.” In general, these relationships involve a formal agreement about roles and responsibilities. The participating organizations share a common objective aimed at the delivery of a public service. They also share tangible and intangible risks, benefits, and resources.

The cases themselves represent a wide variety of public service domains including tax processing, workers compensation insur-

ance, business start-ups, tourist information, and portal-type Internet services for public access to government. (See Table 2 for a representative selection). They encompass collaborations entirely within the public sector, as well as between government and private or nonprofit organizations. A few cross all three sectoral boundaries.

During the first year the research team completed the case study interviews and identified preliminary themes that appear to cut across the different case types and national boundaries. While more analysis is needed, we offer this first look at the emerging themes:

Each collaboration rests on an understood (but often tacit) working philosophy. Collaboration has many meanings and different projects operate on different working assumptions. The underlying norms of each project shape how key roles and functions (such as leadership) are assigned and conducted. For many, the underlying normative structure reflects the historical evolution of the project. Some grew out of a grassroots community of interest while others started with a high-level mandate. As a consequence, the cases exhibit a wide range of work styles and working situations ranging from highly structured to quite informal. For some, equality is important, in others consensus among unequal partners drives decisions. Hierarchy remains a strong philosophy among others.

Collaborative relationships are evolving and dynamic. Each collaboration offers continuous opportunities for feedback and learning. They often employ trial-and-error experimentation, the outcomes of which strongly influence the growth of trust among the participants. In addition, existing and potential participants form

and amend their perceptions of the initiative based on their experiences and observations. Roles and responsibilities shift in different stages of the life cycle of a project. In many instances, observations of early performance strongly affect later actions, perceptions, and results.

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	University of Maryland Baltimore County
	Indiana University
Canada	Le Centre Francophone d'Informatisation des Organisations (CEFRIO)
	University of Quebec at Montreal
	University of New Brunswick
	École Nationale d'Administration Publique
	École des Hautes Études Commerciales
	École Polytechnique de Montréal
Europe	Centre Interfacultaire Technology Assessment, Belgium
	University of Bremen, Germany

Table 1.
Research partners.

Table 2.
Selected cases.

Region	Project	Type	Focus
U.S.	NYS Geographic Information System Coordination Program	public-public-nonprofit-private	Data sharing and development of expertise
	Access Indiana	public-private	Public access to state government information and transactions
	IRS e-file	public-private-nonprofit	Filing of personal income tax returns
	First gov	public-private	Public access to federal government information
Canada	Casastre Quebec	public-private	Real property tax mapping
	E-Commerce for Occupational Health and Safety Claims	public-private	Claims processing for workers compensation
	BonjourQuebec.com	public-private	Quebec tourist information and transactions portal
	Service Ontario Self-Service Kiosks	public-private	Network of kiosks allowing renewal of driving licenses and Social Security cards
	One-Stop Business Registration	public-public	Unique kiosk allowing electronic filing of all forms required to open a new business
Europe	Bremen On-Line	public-private	Public access to city information and transactions
	Hotjob	public-private	Job offers portal

Data-intensive collaborations face issues of data ownership. In all of these collaborations, data is treated as a valuable asset. As a consequence, the collaborators are beginning to face issues about the data ownership rights of the private partners, the stewardship responsibilities of multiple public partners, and the basic question of whether anyone can actually “own” government information.

Multi-organizational collaborations need an institutional framework. Because these initiatives stretch across the boundaries of distinct organizations, they need to establish a new kind of institutional legitimacy. Most often, legitimacy begins with a basis in law or regulation. This is commonly reinforced by the sponsorship of a recognized authority or by formal relationships with key external stakeholders. This formal institutional framework helps these dynamic initiatives weather political transitions and changes in key players. The formal structure also acts as the context for a rich array of complex, informal relationships. These informal relationships are the usual means for getting work done. They spur experimentation and creativity, and, for mature projects, are usually robust enough to resolve most problems.

Technology choices affect participation and results. Technology tools and infrastructure are

important to project performance and IT is generally well-managed by the collaborators. Technology choices also have consistently important effects on the participants and the results. The nature, cost, and cost distribution of the technologies strongly affect participation due to factors such as availability, affordability, and adaptability to different operating environments. Service performance and communication within the collaboration are strongly shaped by the capabilities of the chosen technical tools. Moreover, the ability of the collaboration to evolve to meet changing needs is significantly shaped by the flexibility of the tools. ■

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