Chapter 24

IT and Collaborative Community Services:
The Roles of the Public Library, Local Government, and Nonprofit Entity Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

The role that the Internet has played in redefining the activities of public sector organizations is well-documented. What has yet to be fully explored, however, are recent collaborations among community-oriented entities (local government agencies, public libraries, and non-profit organizations) to provide enhanced services through innovative uses of information technology. These collaborative community services are enhanced by information technology, but also framed within the context of the organizations supporting the services. Using data from the 2011-2012 Public Library Funding and Technology Access Survey (PLFTAS), and drawing upon ongoing research into e-government partnerships between libraries, government agencies, and community organizations as well as community-based civic engagement initiatives, this paper will frame this issue within the contexts of local e-government in the United States; the relationship between public libraries, e-government, and the Internet; and innovative partnerships between public libraries, local government, and nonprofit entities. The article discusses both best practices and common challenges among these partnerships as a guide to future projects.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the Internet has redefined the roles and enhanced the abilities of government agencies to provide public-sector information, communication and services. As technologies develop, the capacity of e-government to help meet community needs and provide access to services continues to evolve, as evidenced by recent collaborations among local government and other community-oriented entities, such as public libraries and non-profit organizations.

During the past ten years, public libraries have assumed key roles in providing access to local e-government, facilitating emergency response, and supporting the local economy, among other roles (Bertot et al., 2006a, 2006b; Sigler et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2012). As part of their new Internet-enabled community services, public libraries have increasingly partnered with local governments and nonprofit entities to provide innovative services that neither could provide individually (Jaeger, Taylor et al., 2012). Similarly, non-profit organizations are leveraging information technology (IT) to serve a greater number of people, as well as to improve the services they are already providing to existing constituents (Koepfler et al., n.d.).

An examination of the context in which the organizations providing these collaborative services operate, as well as of how IT is affected by and itself impacts local government, public libraries, and nonprofit entities, is necessary to understand this dynamic environment and its potential for promoting better information diffusion throughout communities. Using data from the 2011-2012 Public Library Funding and Technology Access Survey (PLFTAS), and drawing upon ongoing research into e-government partnerships between libraries, government agencies, and community organizations as well as community-based civic engagement initiatives, this paper will address these different strands with three main themes:

- Contexts of local e-government in the United States;
- Public libraries, e-government, and the Internet; and
- Interrelationships of public libraries, local government, and nonprofit entities.

From these contexts, the authors sought to answer the following research questions: 1) How are collaborative community services leveraging information technology to meet community information and service needs? 2) What factors lead to successful partnerships? and 3) What factors create barriers to successful partnerships?

The authors begin with a focus on the context of collaborative community services, including a discussion of the local e-government environment, the public library's role in providing e-government information, and the use of social media and networking by agencies in providing e-government to users. Next, the authors discuss the methodology for the survey and case studies used in this research. Structured around existing partnerships, the findings section highlights, the potential implications of community information diffusion through IT-enhanced partnerships. These existing collaborations show that partnerships can provide improved service in meeting a range of community needs – tax assistance, incorporating new residents into the community, supporting local educational institutions – or provide previously impossible community services, such as the provision of grocery service and health information into food deserts where access to affordable, nutritious foods is severely limited. Following the findings, the authors offer a discussion of the success factors found in these partnerships and the challenges inherent in collaborations. The paper concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study, opportunities for future research, and implications of this research.

By exploring existing public library/local government/nonprofit entity partnerships within the context of how public libraries use IT to better serve their communities, and incorporating the perspectives of nonprofit organizations and local governments, this paper will provide a much-needed look at an innovative mechanism for addressing community needs and the potential for further development in this sphere.

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