

# Digital Government Online Education for Public Managers

**Marc Holzer**

*Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey—Newark, USA*

**Tony Carrizales**

*Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey—Newark, USA*

**Younhee Kim**

*Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey—Newark, USA*

## INTRODUCTION

The opportunities that arise from the practice of digital government continue to increase. Public managers responsible for adopting and implementing such new practices will be searching for existing best practices to incorporate into their respective communities. They may choose to rely on their information and communication technology (ICT) departments to develop necessary digital government applications, but an appealing option for public managers is to familiarize themselves with the most recent digital government applications through Web-based courses. Online education eliminates distances, allows for flexible scheduling and can incorporate current best practices of electronic-government on a timely basis.

Public managers play a critical role in the development of digital government initiatives (Halachmi, 2004; Heeks, 1999; Ho, 2002; Melitski, 2003; Weare, Musso & Hale, 1999). Although public managers can refer to numerous individuals within government municipalities, in the case of digital government, the chief administrative officer (CAO) is often the key individual in deciding the direction of government initiatives. By completing Web-based courses, CAOs can assess and strategically plan for effective and efficient digital government in their communities. Melitski (2003) argues that there is a need for public managers that are “familiar with both IT and the programmatic goals and missions of public organizations” (p. 389). With respect to implementing digital citizen participation in government, Holzer, Melitski, Rho, and Schwester (2004) state, as their primary recommendation, “governments should work harder to identify, study, and implement best practices” (p. 28). The means to study such best practices, however, have generally been scarce, and the literature has been limited to specialized e-government reports and articles. But Web-based courses now offer the means for a CAO or any other public manager to study

digital government practices and theories in a more effective and convenient manner.

## BACKGROUND

In order to optimize their city’s e-government performance, public managers now have opportunities to educate themselves via a growing number of courses that address digital government in public administration and management programs. Some of these courses are also being offered online; however, Web-based courses that focus on digital government’s opportunities and challenges are still rare. Web-based education, which is also termed online education, utilizes the Internet to deliver distance education.

Web-based education involves two types of learning: asynchronous and synchronous. In asynchronous online education, students do not need to interact with the instructor in real time. Students can complete a Web-based course on their own time and schedule. Asynchronous online education currently dominates Web-based education because of the advantage of individual control of time (Kim, 2004). Synchronous online education has an advantage when geographically dispersed students and the instructors interact in real time using communication technologies such as digital audio, digital video, and text-based messaging software (Martinez, 2004). Synchronous education is more popular in academic programs than in training programs (Kim, 2004).

Web-based education results in significant, positive outcomes, so that institutions need to learn “how to leverage the technological resources in curriculum and course design, student access and support” (Mayadas, Bourne, & Moore, 2002, p. 9). Web-based education requires effective tools to create, manage, and deliver content and collaborative activities. For that reason, “the selection of a course management system, which uses

templates designed for Internet-enabled instruction, is important in developing online courses” (Kim, 2004, p. 279).

Web-based education is increasingly utilized by academic institutions as a hybrid teaching approach in order to support face-to-face teaching and learning. Further, the United States government has attempted to develop advanced distributive learning initiatives through online education. However, these Web-based courses are typically limited to students within academic programs, whereas public managers may be seeking in-service courses about government’s opportunities and challenges. One approach is certificate or continuing education programs for public managers. For example, the National Center for Public Productivity (NCP) offers an online *Certificate in Public Performance Measurement*, with five-week modules such as “E-government and Citizen Participation” (NCP, 2004). This certificate program includes practitioners, academicians and students. Designed as one-credit courses, these modules are built around course readings, case studies and online discussions. The e-government and citizen participation module addresses issues and opportunities of digital government, and provides case studies. The following five subject areas are based on this certificate module, and may serve as a model for similar Web-based courses in other venues.

## **DIGITAL GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES**

One of the first objectives that any course on digital government should cover is the various definitions, initiatives and forms of practices. E-government, digital democracy and digital divide are just a few of the terms that should be defined at the onset and then further developed throughout the course. This encyclopedia is an ideal reference for such courses as it includes definitions and developmental perspectives on digital government. The following readings can complement the Encyclopedia as they incorporate cases and studies relevant for municipal digital government. Melitski (2004) provides a thorough overview of e-government, including definitions and distinctions used in the public sector. O’Looney (2002) outlines some of the possibilities of a digital government for public managers, while Ho (2002) identifies typical initiatives among local governments. Moon (2002) highlights the status of e-government in relation to its expectations.

## **DIGITAL GOVERNMENT CONSIDERATIONS**

Following a grasp of the terminology and practices of digital government, organizational capacity and the digital

divide should be addressed. The ability to practice e-government is dependent on the organization’s capabilities and the community’s resources for interacting digitally with government. Chen and Perry (2003) and Melitski (2003) address issues of organizational capacity and outsourcing for e-government. But the capacity to reach the community must be complemented by an understanding of the digital divide. If certain populations within a community lack Internet access or Internet-related skills, then the utilization of e-government services will be limited. The U.S. Department of Commerce (1999) has produced a report that outlines various issues associated with the digital divide: households without computers, access to the Internet, and the method of Internet access. Samuel (2002) looks at strategies to move beyond the divide: effective uses of public access points, facilitating computer purchases, and making Internet access more affordable.

## **CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND DIGITAL DEMOCRACY**

An area that often reflects more advanced practices of digital government is citizen participation. Active and equal participation in government by citizens via the Internet is a necessary basis for digital democracy. Kakabadse Kakabadse, and Kouzmin (2003) discuss democratic governance through information technologies. This is part of a larger debate centered on the concept of a digital or electronic democracy. West (2004) looks at the transformation of service delivery via e-government and the resulting attitudes of citizens. The ability to include citizens in government is not limited to service delivery, but can expand to citizen involvement in the decision making process. Holzer et al. (2004) look at the possibilities of digital citizen participation for “restoring trust in government.” Online discussion boards, real-time chat rooms, and e-mail exchanges with elected officials are just a few of the means by which citizens can actively engage government, and exemplary cases of digital citizen participation can be found at every level of government.

## **DIGITAL GOVERNMENT BEST PRACTICES**

Case studies should reflect local, state and/or federal government practices, depending on the course participants. Regular studies survey digital government practices annually with reports highlighting particular areas where governments excel or fail. One such e-government survey at the local level is done annually by the Center for Public

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