

# Government Applications of Virtual Communities

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## INTRODUCTION

Local, state and federal governments face a continuing need to supply increased amounts of information to their constituencies. Requests for information involve routine matters such as filing for a building permit, checking a property's legal description, or looking up employment statistics. Requests for information can also involve more complex matters such as seeking advice on how to file income taxes, how to apply for government-sponsored loan programs and/or jobs, or ways to lobby lawmakers to advance a political point of view. In many cases, individuals are now looking to their governments to interact with them electronically, with the same level of sophistication, accuracy, and timeliness that they are experiencing from other online organizations. As a result, there is a tremendous incentive for governmental agencies to understand the Internet-based needs and wants of their constituencies and to respond to them accordingly. The use of efficient and effective virtual communities and interactive Web sites can assist in this process.

## BACKGROUND

Originally, government agencies used the Internet to create a public relations presence for themselves. As one of the earliest forms of widespread Internet use to reach the general population; city Web sites offered information on government structure, phone numbers for offices and elected officials, and opportunities to follow embedded links to reach local/regional points of interest, private businesses, and schools etc. Subsequently, individuals became aware of and utilized interactive Web sites consisting of access points where they could look up archived government information (property tax records, birth and death records, zoning ordinances, etc.). Today, individuals conduct business-type transactions with the government (pay taxes, purchase licenses, apply for building permits, etc.). It is this latter form of Internet-based interaction that closely typifies the current state of the art for the majority of governmental agencies at all levels.

Government agencies were not the first organizations to realize the power of completing routine transactions with individual users via the Internet, but they are making substantial strides forward in this regard. Known as "e-government", this process is gaining favor across city, county, state, and country-wide governmental agencies for a variety of reasons (Barnes & Vidgen, 2004; Roach, 2002). Government agencies are learning that the Internet allows them to offer many routine services faster and at a fraction of the labor cost associated with traditional walk-in or phone-in services. Wilkins, Swatman and Castleman (2002) observed that government agencies are typically staffed based on the number of individuals required to conduct the internal business of the agency, plus the number of additional individuals needed to maintain an ongoing contact with the public. If a governmental agency sets up a well-supported virtual community where its members can access the information that they need without direct personal contact and/or assistance, the costs associated with providing that information go down on a per transaction basis. As the current practice of "doing more with less" continues to affect funding in the government sector, the trend toward additional reliance on Internet-based services is likely to continue and even grow in practice.

Although the consensus on e-government services is generally positive in the literature, researchers studying the increase in these offerings are also quick to point out that governmental agencies must continually balance the need to reduce costs and streamline activities through Internet-based automation with the fact that not all constituents have access to or knowledge of how to use the Internet (Barnes & Vidgen, 2004; Bullinga, 2004; Steyaert, 2004). While those knowledgeable in the field stop short of saying that the lack of universal Internet access has seriously impeded the development of e-government, this constraint does make it necessary for government agencies to continue to offer their services in parallel (conventional interactions with "live" government workers versus fully-automated methods for carrying out online transactions). Therefore, at this time, the true potential cost savings of moving to fully-automated systems are not understood.

## **ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES IN ESTABLISHING VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES**

Given the overall importance of establishing an online presence for governmental agencies, there are a number of reasons why setting up and maintaining virtual communities can be advantageous. Some of these reasons include cost reduction, accountability, response timeliness, increased accessibility, establishing universal information standards, eliminating favoritism, and enhancing the use of technology in the public domain. Given the past and present successes with the use of virtual communities in governmental agencies, usage is expected to continue and grow with interest in this area.

Virtual communities set up and sponsored by governmental agencies have a high credibility with users (Wilkins, Swatman, & Castleman, 2002). These users, however, tend to hold the governmental agencies accountable for the electronic information available on the Web site and they assume that answers to their questions will be as accurate and as applicable to their needs and wants as those obtained through conventional conversations with governmental agency personnel. The combination of links to compilations of laws, regulations, and guidelines, plus the official sponsorship by a government agency, provides most virtual community members with confidence to take action based on what they have learned. The credibility generated through this type of regular membership participation is among the highest of any virtual community in existence on the Internet.

In addition, members of virtual communities that are sponsored by governmental agencies are often more pleased with the timeliness (rapid responses) to key questions than are individuals who directly contact the governmental agencies in person. The reason for this increased constituent satisfaction appears to be centered around relying on the built-up expertise of the membership of the virtual community, in concert with the available resources and personnel of the governmental agency. Recognizing that this same level of participation also occurs in non-sponsored virtual communities, the researchers partially attribute the rapid response rate to the fact that sponsored communities have more readily-accessible official documentation to aid members in helping themselves.

Accuracy and speed may only partially explain the improved constituent satisfaction metrics. Members of government-sponsored virtual communities also give high marks to the increased accessibility in having information available 24/7 as opposed to only when the governmental agency is open during typical business hours. Members can also access virtual communities from any location

and, in most cases, they do not have to appear in person to handle a transaction(s).

Wilkins, Swatman and Castleman (2002) contend that a virtual community can play a large role in helping governmental agencies move toward establishing universal information standards for acquiring, storing, and retrieving information in useable formats. Even when standardized forms are available for downloading over the Internet, there is no guarantee that users will uniformly fill them out or use the appropriate terminology on them. The resulting range of submissions back to a governmental agency can require a tremendous number of personnel hours to standardize the forms in order to populate a database so that it can be easily searched by others. Therefore, in a virtual community, the governmental agency must bring forward “pinch points” for discussion and constantly and consistently work to keep all of the stakeholders aligned. Regular feedback within the virtual community can assist a governmental agency in designing and implementing database structures that accurately reflect how users will want to query the records in the present and in the future.

Many virtual communities sponsored by governmental agencies also provide information to their members about what is likely to occur in the future—information on changes in regulations, policies, or other factors that could influence the direction that a member might take with respect to his/her business. The goal is not a one-sided information transfer to the membership of the virtual community, but rather, to enhance the communal knowledge base that will allow the governmental agency to handle its mission more efficiently and effectively over time.

Unfortunately, there are three primary disadvantages, or watch-outs, for governmental agencies interested in creating virtual communities for their constituents.

First, there is a risk involved when government agencies (being bodies funded with public money and also being in positions of authority) share information in what may be considered to be a selective manner. A governmental agency can run the risk of favoritism if it shares information that is generally not available within the public domain (Wilkins, Swatman, & Castleman, 2002). Favoritism is best avoided by over-communicating the existence of the virtual community throughout the target market and clearly identifying that all interested parties are welcome to use the virtual community and/or interactive Web site. In doing so, the appearance of a competitive advantage for certain individuals and/or organizations is minimized.

Second, many individuals who rely on specific pathways for receiving information, such as calling a trusted customer service representative, may be reluctant to switch to automated services. In these cases, a virtual

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