



Knowledge and Information Communications Technology Benefits of Government and Non-Profit Community Based Organizations Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

As community organizations seek to obtain federal and state based grants in order to provide community service programs, the diffusion of technological innovations have become very important considerations for research. Partnerships, collaboration and business transactions with the government using the e-government model require knowledge and communications tools and skills, time for the technology to diffuse or become accepted in the community and social systems that further support and set in motion the implementation of these innovative ideas and practices. Unfortunately many based community organizations may not possess these tools, skills, time or social systems that are needed to implement these new innovations. Who are today's Innovation change agents and ICT champions?

INTRODUCTION

In the same vein as commercial enterprises, the federal government has progressively used technological advances and innovations to administer its programs more efficiently and effectively. This has positioned it in the posture of a technology innovation diffusion change agency. To help the government in this effort, President Bush signed into law H.R. 2458, the "E-Government Act of 2002."¹³ This legislation built upon expanding E-Government initiatives by ensuring strong leadership of the information technology activities of federal agencies, setting up a comprehensive framework for information security standards and programs, and establishing uniform safeguards to protect the confidentiality of information provided by the public for statistical purposes. The Act was also designed to assist in expanding the use of the Internet and computer resources in order to deliver government services, consistent with the reform principles, for a citizen-centered, results-oriented, and market-based government. Collaboration and business transactions with the government using the e-government model require knowledge and communications tools and skills, time for the technology to diffuse or become accepted in the community and social systems that further support the implementation of these innovative ideas and practices. Unfortunately many community organizations may not possess these tools, skills, time or social systems that are needed to implement these new innovations.

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DEFINITION OF TERMS

Three key definitions are provided to establish the framework for development of this research. These terms that are defined below are knowledge, ICT and non-profit community based organizations (NPCBOs).

Knowledge cannot really be defined as data or information, though it is related to both. The differences are often a matter of degree or context. Data is a set of discrete, objective facts about events.¹⁰ In an

organizational context, data is described as structured records of transactions. Information can be thought of as data that makes a difference. Contextualized we know for what purpose the data is gathered. Intuitively, we believe that knowledge is broader, deeper and richer than data or information. We accept and use in this research the definition of knowledge below provided by Davenport and Prusak

Knowledge is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. It originates and is applied in the mind of knowers. In organizations it often becomes embedded not only in documents or repositories but also in routines, processes practices and norms.³

The term "electronic-commerce" (e-commerce) describes any transaction conducted over the Internet or through Internet access, comprising the sale, lease, license, offer, or delivery of property, goods, services, or information, whether or not for consideration, and includes the provision of Internet access.¹ ICT is defined in this study as the utilization of computers, the Internet and web-based tools to conduct research and transactions between organizations utilizing these technologies for the purpose of seeking and or obtaining federal grants. The term ICT is used in this study instead of e-commerce because its definition seats it in a broader context for the purpose of delineating the NPO from the for-profit commercial business. The lack of financial resources sufficient for access and effective utilization of technological tools is a very common problem of non-profit community based organizations (NPCBOs). Kvasny & Lee⁷ discuss the proliferation of ICT and the dilemma of the Community Based Organization in their research. "As more resources move to online channels, the lack of ICT use negatively impacts the organizations ability to secure resources and funding, to operate cost effectively, to generate meaningful program outcomes and to efficiently communicate with their constituents and potential partners or collaborators"

A NPCBO is a tax-exempt organization that serves the public interest distinctively in a community setting. In general, the purpose of this type of organization must be charitable, educational, scientific, religious or literary. Although it is characterized as an organization it is a business that must serve the public interest and it will succeed or fail, as any business will, depending on how well it operates in today's society utilizing knowledge and ICT.

BACKGROUND MOTIVATION

As the US government shifts towards its e-government goals, the requirements for knowledge and ICT expertise become essential for NPCBOs to become equipped to seek grant opportunities. Sir Frances Bacon the English author, courtier, & philosopher is believed to be the original author of the quote "Knowledge is power." Specifically, for NPCBOs this power is in the knowledge of what, when, and where the grants are available. It is the knowledge of what, when and how to discover the procedures and processes for obtaining the grants that are available.

The Honorable Congressman Steny H. Hoyer of the Maryland 5th district thought it important that his office provide a grants forum for the leaders of the NPCBOs in his district. With this enhanced and raised level of consciousness (knowledge) of available resources the hope is that the local citizens will be effectively and efficiently served. Congressman Hoyer expressed his concern that the grants forum be “useful, helpful and financially beneficial” for the organizations in attendance.

CONTEXT

This research draws on the pervasive research of Everett Rogers and his theory of diffusion of innovation⁹. This theory is the optimal scaffold for viewing this single case phenomenological study. The perspective is the diffusion of technology involving NPCBOs in their effort to activate and manage their service programs through the implementation of E-government IT initiatives.

The four major elements of Roger’s theory⁹ are the innovation, the communications channels, time and social systems. According to Rogers the innovation process of an organization is composed of the Initiation stage followed by a decision point that precedes the implementation stage. The initiation stage consists of the knowledge and information gathering, conceptualization and planning for the adoption of the innovation. The innovation, which is an idea, practice or process that is perceived as new by a group for adoption, is the knowledge and ICT required for conceptualization and planning. The communication channels are the networks and ICT tools used to gather information in order to reach a decision point. Time is a factor element that either hinders or aids the innovation decision process. The social systems element brings the concept of systems theory into the process of diffusion of innovation. It is defined as a set of interrelated groups that are engaged in joint problem solving to accomplish a common goal. These systems are composed of groups or individuals that serve to diffuse and implement the innovation. The change agent defined as the government in this study uses lieutenants (agencies and departments) and technology champions (Congressman Hoyer & Staff) to support the information gathering process for NPCBO’s that consists of opinion leaders that all serve to jointly accomplish the goal of providing community services. See chart 1. The final stage implementation consists of events, actions and decisions involved in putting the innovation into use, which is accomplished only after the decision process.

Innovation – Decision Process

The innovation decision process is the process through which an organization passes from knowledge of an innovation to formation of an attitude toward the innovation that leads to a decision to adopt or reject the innovation. The components of the decision process model are knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation and confirmation. The decision process is fully influenced by change agents. These change agents are individuals or groups who influences clients’ innovations decisions in the direction deemed desirable by the change agent. Change agents called ICT champions are analytical intuitive and powerful communicators that demonstrate interpersonal and negotiating skills in order to influence the decision acceptance process of

Table 1 – Congressmen Hoyer Federal Grants Forum

FEDERAL AGENCIES		
Agency Change Agents Lieutenants	Knowledge Communication Channels	Technology Websites (ICT) Innovation and Communication Channels
(HUD)	Oral Presentation	www.hud.gov/grants/index.cfm
(HHS)	Oral Presentation Power Point Presentations Grant Information Resources Document	www.Grants.gov www.whitehouse.gov/omb/grants
(DOL)	Oral Presentation VETS Brochures	www.dol.gov
(ED)	Oral Presentation Powerpoint presentation/Handout	www.ed.gov www.firstgov.gov www.cfda.gov
Congressman Hoyer	Oral Presentation Funding Flyer Grant administration resource List Foundation directory	http://www.gpoaccess.gov/fr/index.html www.hoyer.house.gov

unenlightened groups. Opinion leaders are the influential group that are taught or convinced of the benefits of the acceptance of the innovation to the point they become influential ICT champions in their community.

RESEARCH

The Honorable Congressman Steny H. Hoyer of the 5th district of Maryland held an informational federal grants forum for NPCBOs within his district. This advanced registration forum served as a knowledge and technological educational awareness program. Federal and state government agencies were invited to address the process for securing grant funding. Table 1 below provides an outline of the agencies in attendance, the knowledge resources and the technological links they provided.

This single case phenomenological study is an in-depth exploration of a grant-funding forum presented by Congressman Hoyer and his staff.

RESEACH GOALS

In an effort to shed light on the knowledge and ICT needed to seek and pursue federal grants, a detailed qualitative endeavor will be conducted analyzing the data collected during the forum and using the Rogers diffusion of innovation research as a focal lens⁹. The research will make available a structure for organizing the web-based ICT links made available during the forum and during the snowballed research. In addition it will develop a framework model for the development of partnerships between NPCBOs and Government agencies to diffuse the technologies needed for NPCBOs to Implement their programs while effectively using the new technologies of E-government.

RESEARCH SITE

The setting for this case study was the federal grant forum presented by Congressman Steny H. Hoyer as a resource medium for Executive Directors, Grant Coordinators and Program Managers for NPCBOs in the 5th Congressional district. The invitation only forum was held August 26, 2003 at the Harmony Hall Regional Center in Fort Washington, Maryland.

DATA COLLECTION

Qualitative research methods were specifically selected for this study due to the researcher’s desire to be a participant observer in the research.⁸ As an action researcher the participant will be able to provide a feedback framework for the NPCBOs that extended an invitation to attend the forum. Additionally, this method most appropriately met the requirement of generating rich data that is embedded in a particular context. The forum observation, resources, other handout materials and referenced website linkage evaluations were the primary sources of data collection.

During the forum written field notes were taken during the presentation and later analyzed. The Honorable Congressman and government agency representatives either gave unassisted oral or PowerPoint presentations. Each speaker either referenced or gave direct instruction to pursue further information via various websites. The data from the researched evaluation of the websites lead to more data for the evaluation of knowledge and technology in the grant making process.

DATA ANALYSIS

Forum Presentations

Four federal and state agencies made presentations as can be seen in Table 1. Only the federal agencies are considered in this research because they operate within the scope of the federal initiatives and Acts. The presenters each spoke to the knowledge required to submit successful proposal applications to their agencies specifically and to the government in general. The major resources emphasized in all four presentations were the various website linkages providing further assistance diffusing the technology. The following paragraphs briefly summarize the knowledge provided in the presentations by the congressman and the four agencies.

Congressman Steny H. Hoyer

Congressman Hoyer spoke to the challenges in America of not meeting the needs of the neediest of our society and President Bush's advocacy for the need of a strong volunteer force among the US citizens to support those needs. With today's growing budgets and increasing deficits the demands for services provided by NPCBOs are increasing. Grants, loans and technical assistance are all available through the federal government, foundations, state and local agencies for the 3,981 NPCBOs based in Maryland counties that make up the 5th Congressional District. He stated his commitment to providing the best information available with website linkages for NPO to be successful in providing the best services for the citizens of the district. The congressman directed the participants to contact his office for assistance in the application process, including requesting a letter of support for grant application.

US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Representative

A Program Analyst from HUD spoke to the HUD grant seeking process. The HUD agency has 43 programs and awards 2.3 billion dollars per year through its Super Notice of Funding Availability (SuperNOFA) process. Their grants are awarded based on a points system, which is defined in the SuperNOFA. In order to fully understand the way HUD distributes its funds the speaker directed the participants to read the general section or the first 36 pages of the SuperNOFA and referenced this as a Bible for HUD grant seekers. Other administrative advice given included requesting outside support to review grant applications, making contacts within HUD and calling or emailing HUD to ask questions prior to application submittal.

US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Representative

The Special Assistant to the Office of the Secretary and Acting Director of the Office of Grants Management and Policy began her presentation discussing Public-Law PL 106-107. This law is in the process of being implemented to streamline and simplify the grants administrative process across all federal agencies. The government will be using a standard announcement format and there will be a standard grant application form provided through Grants.gov. All grant applicants must have a single universal Identifier "DUNS" Number beginning October 1, 2003. This storefront gateway has all open grants at the federal level and it provides search engine knowledge. For further federal register announcements and further information the white house website (www.whitehouse.gov/omb/grants) is another source.

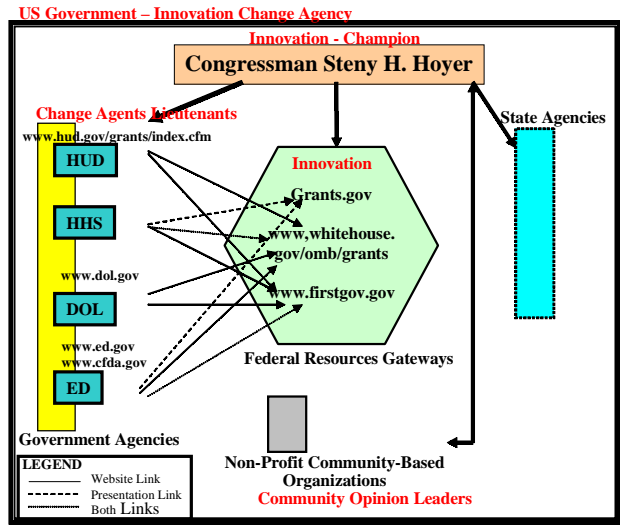
US Department of Labor (DOL) Representative

This Agency has a totally different model for grant awards than the other government agencies. Its grants are awarded thru the 1-stop service program. The Non-profits must collaborate with the designated 1-stop organizations that are supervised by the Work Force Investment Board. The DOL awarded 3.7 Million in grants to Faith-based and Community Organizations in 2002 although non were in the county of the forum. In order to be awarded DOL grants one must read and understand the solicitation, precede item-by-item, answer questions and follow the instructions. The Work Force Investment Act imposed one barrier to obtaining DOL grants through the 1-stop system. That barrier is no feedback or responses to grant applications are provided post submittal.

US Department of Education (ED) Representative

The Director of Grants Policy and Oversight Staff gave a presentation emphasizing an agenda that included increasing access/leveling the playing field, locating funding opportunities, agency application review process and working together to ensure successful project outcomes. ED offers two types of grants, formula grants based on economics and population and discretionary grants screened through the Secretary. In an effort to demystify the grants process she quoted the President's E-grant vision " Produce a simple unified "storefront" for all customers of federal grants to electronically find opportunities, apply and manage grants." Since all application submissions are

Chart 1 – Direct Website Resource Linkages



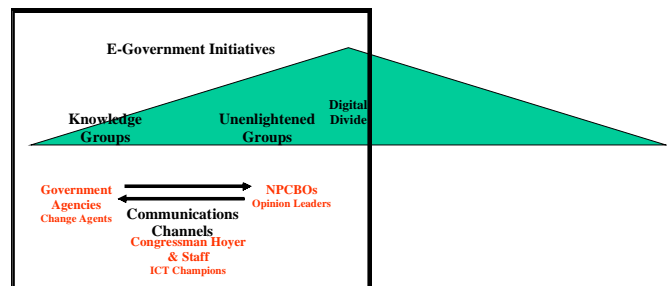
electronic the ED provides a common grants portal on the Web which also provides a tutorial of how to use the website. The ED gives incentives to novice organizations by awarding priority points to those who have never been awarded grants before. The ten page grant making document on the ED site is a good place to begin research. Other suggestions to establish a competitive advantage for NPCBO included finding potential partners, having good financial standards in place to produce reports, registering with the state FBCI and sending in resumes to volunteer to be a peer reviewer for applications.

In the effort to develop a more streamlined grant making process across all governmental agencies we found that several federal resource gateways have been established to uniformly assist grant seekers. Three found in Chart 1 presently are linked in each of the agency's websites. These gateways offer first notice email notification of grant opportunities as they become available based on a profile preference. With the exception of DOL, each of the federal agencies websites offered a dedicated grants web page. Congressman Hoyer's website provided extensive grant making knowledge and links to multiple state, foundations and federal grant making agencies. The ability to effectively seek grants begins with knowledge and ICT. Without both it is nearly impossible to be competitive or even conduct business with the governments at any level local, state or federal.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, by using qualitative research methods to study a federal grants forum for leaders of NPCBOs it was found that both the knowledge and the ICT web links; provided both very valuable and informative resources for NPCBOs to began the grant seeking process initiation stage. It also was an excellent opportunity for NPCBOs to network with other organizations for the purpose of developing partnership to increase their social systems. Key knowledge factors were gained about the requirements; processes and procedures for submitting grant appli-

Chart 2 - Innovation Diffusion Model for Government and NPCBOs Partnerships



cations for each of the four agencies represented. ICT links to federal resource gateways and agency websites for further research and educational aid increased the knowledge base. Another key knowledge factor identified in the research was the networking contact support offered by the congressman and the agency representatives who can be identified as external support service providers or grant consultants.

The technology innovations that need to be diffused in order to effectively move the social service programs once overwhelmingly implemented by government agencies to local organizations requires a focused glance at the four innovation diffusion elements. NPCBOs, which in many cases have been on the wrong side of the digital divide, are presently on the front lines providing social services to those most in need in our communities. Congressman Hoyer opened the communication channels as an ICT Champion to help diffuse the innovation in his district through his forum that pulled together government change agents and opinion leaders from NPCBOs. Through the forum the social system is developed through the partnerships established as a result. Given continued support from the change agents and ICT champions over time the NPCBO's will be able to narrow the gap of the digital divide that presently hinders their ability to jointly work with the government to implement programs at the local level and solve the social service problems of their communities.

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