

Chapter 4

Managing Virtual Public Organizations

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ABSTRACT

The term virtual organization is used in the literature to describe a range of public and private online work settings from telecommuting in traditional organizations to sophisticated arrangements for project members in different institutions and multiple locations to share information and interact online on a joint undertaking. Though virtual governmental organizations are increasingly common, the management challenges they pose are only beginning to be studied. Here, an exploration of management process in these virtual settings begins by distinguishing among forms of virtual organizations based upon whether members represent single or multiple organizations and whether their contact is continuous or intermittent. While the literature on virtual organizations suggests that all virtual organizations will be decentralized and self-organizing, here, differences in the forms of virtual organization are expected to be associated with differences in management practices. Citizens are engaged by these new forms both as clients and as members, with a range of anticipated advantages. Primary and secondary case materials and published research on virtual organizations in the United States are used to answer questions about the use of information and communication technologies, the management of coordination, and leadership in two forms of virtual organizations. The differences found are not entirely as expected. Actual patterns of management are complex; both hierarchical and self-organizing managerial patterns can co-exist.

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INTRODUCTION

The term virtual organization is used in the literature to describe a range of public and private online collaborative activities from telecommuting in traditional organizations to sophisticated arrangements for project members in different institutions and multiple locations to share information and interact online on a joint undertaking. When the work performed virtually is governmental, they represent another challenge for electronic public management. The Telework Enhancement Act signed by President Obama in 2010 encourages the use of virtual workplaces in the federal government, and other forms of virtual organizations are emerging as an important new institutional form of organization at all levels of government. Public safety and intelligence information is collected and shared securely among many U.S. agencies online. Citizen services are offered in some cases by a virtual network of state, local and non-governmental organizations, such as corporations like Amazon assemble businesses into virtual shops. In science and technology realms these arrangements combine government actors at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the Department of Energy and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), for example, with their partners in academia, non-profit organizations and the business world. They link government organizations with each other and with other institutions in funded and unfunded partnerships.

Though virtual governmental organizations are increasingly common, the management challenges they pose in practice are only beginning to be studied. While some research has been conducted on the potential advantages of virtual organizations and their management (Green and Roberts, 2010; Ahuja and Carley, 1999; Cascio, 2000) there is much more to be learned about “the basic organizational abstractions, communication models, trust mechanisms, and technology infrastructure required to form and operate effective

[virtual organizations] across a broad range of target domains” (National Science Foundation 2008, 7). This chapter aims to make a contribution by investigating two of the variety of forms of virtual public organizations and the ways in which they manage the coordination of work. What communication and information technologies are in use? Do managers use traditional hierarchical design and coordination logics, or do lateral, self-organizing principles dominate? How does leadership direction and culture management proceed in virtual settings? Answers to these questions even for a limited array of virtual organizations will help clarify the management challenges of virtual organizations and suggest hypotheses for future research about this increasingly common public organization form.

This chapter is concerned with the ways government agencies use Web 2.0 and other information and communication technologies to manage the agencies that provide public services. The use of web technologies within agencies to make telework and distributed work teams possible is the focus. Thus this chapter focuses mainly indirectly on the ways interactive web technologies serve and engage citizens. More specific ways that citizens are affected by these developments are discussed below.

DEFINING AND CLASSIFYING VIRTUAL ORGANIZATIONS

The virtual organization has been defined as “a geographically distributed organization whose members are bound by a long-term common interest or goal, and who communicate and coordinate their work through information technology (Ahuja and Carley, 1999, p.743). Common characteristics of all of the forms of virtual organization that fall under this definition are that members are separated by distance and time and interactions occur using a variety of communication and information technologies. These technologies may be as simple

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