7

Electronic Governance on the Internet

by
Michael A. Warren
Electronic Archive Services
and
Louis F. Weschler
Arizona State University

Can Internet-based technologies deliver on the promise of making government more accessible? What tangible benefits can these technologies bring to the public manager? Computers are becoming smaller, yet more powerful and considerably less expensive. The power of the computer—a faster processor, more memory, and more storage capacity—is not as important as its network capability. How well does the computer connect to the Internet to send and retrieve needed information? Warren and Weschler examine how Internet-based technologies facilitate the two-way linkage of citizens, groups and government agencies. The authors address citizen access issues and the implications of Internet technologies for electronic governance.

Governmental institutions were transformed 100 years ago to recreate public order for an industrialized society. Today, the challenge is the transition from an industrial model of government—centralized, hierarchical, and operating in a spatially defined economy—to a new model of governance adaptive to a virtual, global, knowledge-based, digital economy, and fundamental societal shifts (Battelle, 1998). The shift from the Industrial Age to the Information Age requires us to take a hard, critical look at the basic interrelated functions and networks of governance.

Governance is the process of making collective, public decisions for the good of society. Governments in the United States are the principal, pub-

lic authorities of governance. Governments, however, interact with and depend on many other public, private and volunteer organizations in making, implementing and assessing public policies. Contemporary democratic governance consists of thousands of interacting networks. Good governance depends largely on the capacity of public administrators to effectively manage the public's affairs through networks. Likewise, effective democratic participation in governance depends on the capacity of ordinary citizens to communicate with those in power. Electronic networks hold great promise as tools for access to and management of the societal, political and organizational networks within which public managers operate.

In an information-rich society, issues about centralization, decentralization and autonomous decisionmaking in these social, political and organizational networks need serious reconsideration. How leaders, for example, define rules under which governance units may interact could facilitate growth of robust networks for information access and feedback among new systems to shape the future (Battelle, 1998). On the other hand, poor choices of new rules could retard the development and use of robust networks in governance.

Information technologies, especially those related to the Internet, promise to revolutionize conditions of participatory governance. Asymmetries in availability and use of information among various participants in governance—citizens, consumers, interest groups, lobbyists, legislators, administrators, judges and mass media—long have produced process and substantive political inequities. As technical information became an increasingly important resource in politics, those with expertise and access to expert information enhanced their domination of governance at all levels in the American political system. Widespread access to the voluminous information on the Internet, however, could support a more even distribution of usable information. This access may revolutionize capacity of all political actors including ordinary citizens to more fully participate in processes of governance. This outcome is not secure, but the promise is great.

Managers in the Midst of Networks

Public managers find themselves in the midst of a "strategic triangle" (Moore, 1995). The three corners of the triangle—substantive (client-centered outcome) values, operations, and politics—are three meta networks within which the manager works to create public good while managing public organizations. Managers must strategically manage their organizations to produce goods and services that are valuable to beneficiaries in an operationally feasible manner within the constraints of political legitimacy and support. The effective manager brings together and balances the demands and resources of each network in the process of leading public organizations.

Electronic information systems assist managers in tapping into and strategically interacting with each network. Electronic networks can enhance the capacity of public managers in making political strategies, operations decisions and value judgments in meeting citizen needs.

For example, electronic-based communication and commerce are at the core of