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## **Chapter V**

# **Government Web Portals: Management Issues and the Approaches of Five States**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Web portals are the dominant organizational motif for e-government service delivery. To date, most reviews of government portal experiences focus on the types and technical sophistication of delivered services as well as design issues, such as usability. Management issues, like commercialization and centralization, receive relatively little attention. The authors define and argue for a more management-oriented perspective. Several major issues are explored and then the experiences of five states are used to demonstrate how their consideration presents a very different view of portal strategies for researchers.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

As of February 2002, more than 143 million Americans, or 54 percent of the total population of the United States, have used the Internet. This number continues to increase at a rate of approximately two million users per month (NTIA, 2002). The Internet is, and will continue to be, a major tool disseminating information worldwide. From

hospitals to police stations, from private firms to schools, millions of Americans in every state in the nation have daily access to the Internet and use it regularly.

Given this level of public access, Web-based government services are critical to service delivery. Most government efforts began as single agency sites, usually informational more so than direct services, but in the late 1990s, the idea of a centralized site to navigate the offerings of a government unit developed: the web portal.

Today, web portals are arguably the leading organizational strategy for the provision of online government services. Every state government has a web portal. However, understanding exactly what a portal is and how such a strategy is developed, is hampered by the very definition. Consider this definition:

*“A web portal serves as the integrated gateway into state government web sites and provides visitors with a single point of contact for online service delivery within the state. Because portals integrate state e-service, they can improve access to government, reduce service-processing costs, and enable state agencies to provide a higher quality of service. (Gant et al., p. 10)”*

This typical definition stresses that a portal provides (1) a single site for accessing all government services and (2) e-service applications. Early “portals” were mostly just homepages with links to various agencies and perhaps a search engine. A true portal presumes some organization around service and not agencies. Such an approach appears to be heavily influenced by private sector websites.

Web portals, regardless of their form, are virtual requirements for Web-based government access. However, despite their rapid adoption, such an approach carries significant management and policy issues, aside from the obvious concern about their effectiveness in meeting their goals of improved citizen access, reduced service costs, and better quality service

In this chapter, we seek to create a boilerplate for future, more evaluative research focused on major management and policy issues with the web portal approach. Specifically, we begin by reviewing some existing literature, then outline major management and policy issues, and follow with more in-depth reviews of the efforts of five states (Florida, Kansas, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and New Mexico) as demonstrations of how such issues create important research questions for future evaluations.

## PREVIOUS STUDIES

There are two primary studies to date on state Web portals. The Center for Digital Government (<http://www.centerdigitalgov.com/>) and the Progress and Freedom Foundation’s (<http://www.pff.org>) release of the *Digital State* study documenting state government progress in online service delivery. Also relevant to the topic of state portals is the report, *State Web Portals: Delivering and Financing E-Service*, by Gant et al. (2002).

The *Digital State 2001* study evaluates each state’s web portal using eight categories of criteria (Lassman, 2002) for use of the Internet:

1. To locate and file paperwork;
2. To retrieve tax information, forms and filing and for digital recordkeeping;

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