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**Chapter IX**

**Digital Government and  
Individual Privacy**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The growth of the Internet and digital government has dramatically increased the Federal government's ability to collect, analyze, and disclose personal information about many private aspects of citizens' lives. Personal information once available only on paper to a limited number of people is now instantly retrievable anywhere in the world by anyone with a computer and an Internet connection. Over time, there has also been a declining level of trust by Americans in government, and currently, many perceive the government as a potential threat to their privacy. Given these forces at work in our society, one should not be surprised to read the results of surveys that show privacy as a top concern of citizens in the 21st century. If citizens do not believe that the government is adequately protecting the privacy of their individual information, they may be less willing to provide this information. Such reluctance could compromise the ability of government to collect important information necessary to develop, administer and evaluate the impact of various policies and programs. Privacy issues discussed in this chapter include challenges regarding (1) protecting personal privacy; (2) ensuring confidentiality of data collected; and (3) implementing appropriate security controls. Perspectives on privacy and stewardship responsibilities of agencies are also discussed.*

## INTRODUCTION

As discussed in earlier chapters, governments have an increasing ability to accumulate, store, retrieve, cross-reference, analyze and link vast amounts of personal information — in an ever faster and more cost-efficient manner. This is largely the result of advances in the use of information technology (IT) and the Internet, which continues to change the way Federal agencies communicate, use and disseminate information, deliver services, and conduct business. These advances have the potential to help build better relationships between government and the public by facilitating Federal agencies' timely and efficient interaction with citizens. According to a January 2001 poll, nearly half of Americans have used a government website and almost three-quarters believe that issues concerning electronic government (e-government), also known as digital government, should be a high priority.<sup>1</sup>

Generally speaking, e-government refers to the use of technology, particularly Web-based Internet applications, to enhance an individual agency's website, for access to and delivery of government information and service to citizens — including business partners and employees — other agencies, and entities.<sup>2</sup> At the Federal level, agencies have identified 1,371 electronic government initiatives, ranging from those that simply disseminate information to those that are expected to transform the way the government operates. At the state level, according to the National Association of State Chief Information Officers, government-to-business electronic interaction is well under way and government-to-citizen and government-to-government electronic interaction is rapidly increasing. At the local level, according to a survey in the fall of 2000 by the International City/County Management Association and Public Technology, Inc., about 83 percent of local governments had websites, but few local governments were providing interactive service delivery on line,<sup>3</sup> although many jurisdictions planned to offer such services.

While the Internet opens new opportunities for streamlining processes and enhancing delivery of services, Federal executives and managers must also be cognizant of the responsibilities and challenges that accompany these opportunities, including (1) sustaining committed executive leadership, (2) building effective e-government business cases, (3) maintaining a citizen focus, (4) protecting personal privacy and confidentiality, (5) implementing appropriate security controls, (6) maintaining electronic records, (7) maintaining a robust technical infrastructure, (8) addressing IT human capital concerns, and (9) ensuring uniform service to the public.<sup>4</sup>

This chapter discusses in particular the responsibilities and challenges identified in GAO reports and studies dealing with the issues (4) and (5) above: protecting personal privacy and confidentiality, as well as implementing appropriate security controls. The sections below discuss perspectives on privacy, followed by the issues and key GAO findings associated with privacy, confidentiality, and security. This chapter concludes with a discussion on the need for agency stewardship over data collected on individual citizens.

## PERSPECTIVES ON PRIVACY

In our society, there is an inherent tension between the desire for the free flow of information versus the concern for maintaining individual privacy. This tension is

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