



Chapter XVII

Training for Digital Government

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ABSTRACT

The era of digital government is upon us. Are government officials and employees prepared for this paradigm shift? The use of digital government applications has increased exponentially in the past decade but the training that should accompany it has not. This article seeks to offer insight into the current need for and state of training for digital government, as well as to highlight key models at each level of government. Additionally, it attempts to outline a training methodology for Federal, state and local employees and officials in order to reduce the information asymmetry that occurs within the context of digital government.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

As the information age advances, citizens expect a more responsive and accountable government. They demand government information and services to be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The use of digital government enables the people to have immediate access and responsiveness, while reducing the number of personal interactions with government employees. Often, this is translated into “citizens online instead of in line.” With the era of digital government upon us, Federal, state and local governments need to prepare their elected officials and employees to handle the multitude of changes incorporated into digital government.

Digital government is the public sector component of the information technology revolution. Technology has been touted as a vehicle for enabling new methods of

production, increasing the flow and accuracy of information, and even replacing traditional standard operating procedures (Landsbergen and Wolken, 2001). Information technology in government has long been acknowledged as a method for improving efficiency and communication (Kraemer and King, 1978; Norris and Kraemer, 1996). However, until the advent of the Internet, the use of technology in government primarily dealt with batch processing of mass transactions using mainframe computers. Now, IT developments such as electronic mail (e-mail) have changed interpersonal communications to eliminate the constraints of geography, space and time, with profound organizational consequences (Rahm, 1999). The newest phase of digital government moves far beyond back-office applications and engages citizens, businesses and other governments in collaborative, virtual experiences that traditionally existed in real time and space.

To adequately address the training issues associated with digital government, it is essential to understand its current and projected roles. The increasing importance and widespread application of digital government has been broadly examined over the past decade. Recent articles indicate that digital government applications and Web-based services are growing exponentially (Moon, 2002; Fountain, 2001). According to the 2002 International City/County Managers Association e-government survey, over 73 percent of municipalities with populations larger than 2,500 have web sites. The 2002 Pew Internet and American Life Project indicates that 58 percent (68 million people) of American Internet users have accessed at least one governmental web site (Larson and Rainie, 2002). Clearly, the citizen demand for and governmental usage of digital government indicates that digital government and its applications will only increase in importance over time. This further illustrates the need for assessing the current state of training for digital government, as well as offering prescriptive recommendations for additional training undertakings.

The importance of technology training for public administrators is highlighted by the studies and publications dealing with the topic; however, the primary focus of available literature is on the integration of technology training into collegiate public administration programs. The focus on information technology in schools of public administration began in 1988, when the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) added computing as a skill set for accredited Masters of Public Administration (MPA) programs (Northrop, 2002). In 1993, Perry and Kraemer advocated for new educational practices to educate public sector employees on understanding and implementing information technology. In 1998, Brown and Brudney completed a comprehensive examination of 106 MPA programs to determine program efficacy in meeting the NASPAA requirements related to information technology education. They found that only about 30 percent of the schools included in the sample offered instruction on technology planning, policy development, and evaluation, despite the NASPAA recommendation to include these in the curriculum (Brown and Brudney, 1998). By 2001, Kim and Layne had conducted an empirical study of student perceptions of digital government and developed a straw man for future training, both in the schools of public administration as well as for the leaders of the public sector. Based on their recommendations, this article seeks to examine the need for training, the current state of training, the best practices in Federal, state, and local government, as well as offer prescriptive suggestions for new training initiatives.

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