

Culture Shift: Next-Generation Government

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"We're living in an age where technology can put information that was previously held by a few into the hands of almost everyone. So the argument that has applied for well over a century—that in every area of life we need people at the center to make sense of the world for us and make decisions on our behalf—simply falls down.

"In its place rises up a vision of real people power. This is what we mean by the Post-Bureaucratic Age...skeptical about big state power; committed to social responsibility and non-state collective action. The effects of this redistribution of power will be felt throughout our politics, with people in control of the things that matter to them, a country where the political system is open and trustworthy, and power redistributed from the political elite to the man and woman in the street."

—U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron

Introduction

In their private, social, and professional lives, people are learning to exploit the opportunities and manage the risks of a world increasingly characterized by new communication and collaboration tools. Businesses, large and small, are pioneering new models of value creation, service, and innovation afforded by these new tools.

More important, the habits and mind-set these tools reflect and reinforce are disrupting often-entrenched cultures of hierarchy and control. In business, in media, in personal social interactions, big shifts are emerging in a world that is less deferential and more open and transparent, where reputation and status are increasingly earned and sustained as a function of contribution, not status. We should expect—and welcome—the same impact in government and politics.

The emergence of a more connected world has changed the way all organizations operate, enabling distributed operating models that are less dependent on hierarchy and "command and control." The public sector must embrace and master this new operating model, which is akin to the distributed networking design that provides the foundation of the Internet.

Distributed networks are, of course, the opposite of the traditional hierarchy and command-and-control centralization on which government continues to rely to produce public value at scale and with integrity. In an open and "distributed" world, this approach feels increasingly less appropriate because:



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- It is not good at dealing with change.
- It is not good at tackling complex problems.
- It delivers standard rather than personalized solutions.
- It treats the citizen as a stand-in-line recipient of public services.
- It is based on an “expert/leader-knows-best” philosophy.

Policymakers, public leaders, and public services are searching for governance models that can:

- Predict and preempt change (anticipation)
- Deal with failure (resilience)
- More effectively generate and implement change
- Distribute power, authority, and accountability back out to the edge (in the form of frontline staff in public agencies and to communities and networks)

It is a model in which public value is often created beyond the formal structures and boundaries of the public sector.

Implications for the Public Sector

The public sector now has an unprecedented opportunity to radically transform the way it interacts with citizens through the use of Web 2.0 tools and social media—and many governments and other public-sector organizations have implemented initiatives that provide citizens with greater access to information, along with opportunities to provide and review feedback and discussion on issues.

The Cisco Internet Business Solutions Group (IBSG) believes the public sector needs to go still further, exploring ways to enable citizens to coproduce public services, creating distributed models of public service provision where users of a service are actively engaged in producing the outcomes delivered. This has the potential of transforming the relationship between citizens and public institutions, and between citizens and their representatives through collaboration, transparency, and empowerment.

Collaboration

The web has transformed our ability to form groups. In many contexts, self-organizing groups can outperform traditional organizations.¹ Wikipedia and the Linux operating system are well-known examples.

Self-organizing groups have a volunteer ethos that expects people to contribute what they can, with privileged roles assigned on a consensus or transparent meritocratic basis. Influence and impact are a function of the value of the ideas that people contribute and the energy they bring to the collective endeavor of the larger group. Because they tap into a shared interest (and through this, a shared identity), members are often more highly motivated than in conventional organizations, and are more agile and innovative because the costs of coordination and the costs of failure are vastly lower.

In public-sector organizations, control and rigorous processes for accountability are vitally important. Strongly hierarchical organizations also are less effective at innovating and have difficulty dealing with complex, rapidly changing problems. This suggests public-sector

organizations will find it difficult to move toward Web 2.0-style collaboration, but it also means they have the most to gain from it.

The possibilities for peer-to-peer collaboration in the public sector are almost limitless. In the central government context, this might mean creating platforms that allow individuals to share information and ideas across different teams and departments. Or it could mean connecting similarly tasked staff in different organizations. There already are real-life examples of this happening. The “rightsnet”² website provides a platform for offering welfare advice to U.K. citizens; people can discuss issues, raise questions, and share resources such as leaflets and fact sheets, whether they work for a central government department, a local authority, a charity, or a private-sector organization.

Sometimes it is the practitioners themselves who embrace the opportunities of self-organization. In the United Kingdom, one enterprising government IT professional thought it would be good to bring together all those working on helping the government adapt to the web. Through his efforts, the UKGovWeb Barcamp³ was launched—a one-day event (now in its second year) that brings together a passionate community of public, private, and third-party workers committed to web-based innovation in government. These are now becoming increasingly familiar hallmarks of the way new applications and solutions are developed. In this case, the community has weekly informal meetings and has sparked a wide range of virtual collaborations and conversations.

Encouraging new types of collaboration should be an important priority for the public sector. No one would deny the importance of due process and accountability, but given the opportunities provided by modern communication technologies, the emphasis should be on sharing more information within and among organizations, and on encouraging greater collaboration across teams and organizations as well as within them. Greater collaboration and adherence to the enduring values of due process are not mutually exclusive. In fact, in a more connected world, it's possible that effective collaboration will be an indispensable feature of ensuring that due process, and the accountability that goes with it, can actually be delivered.

A less-siloed public sector would have better internal feedback mechanisms, be more open to new ideas, and be better able to deal with change. But achieving this will be a significant management challenge. Creating a new balance between command-and-control and frontline empowerment will be a long and difficult process, but it is hard to deny that it needs to be explored.

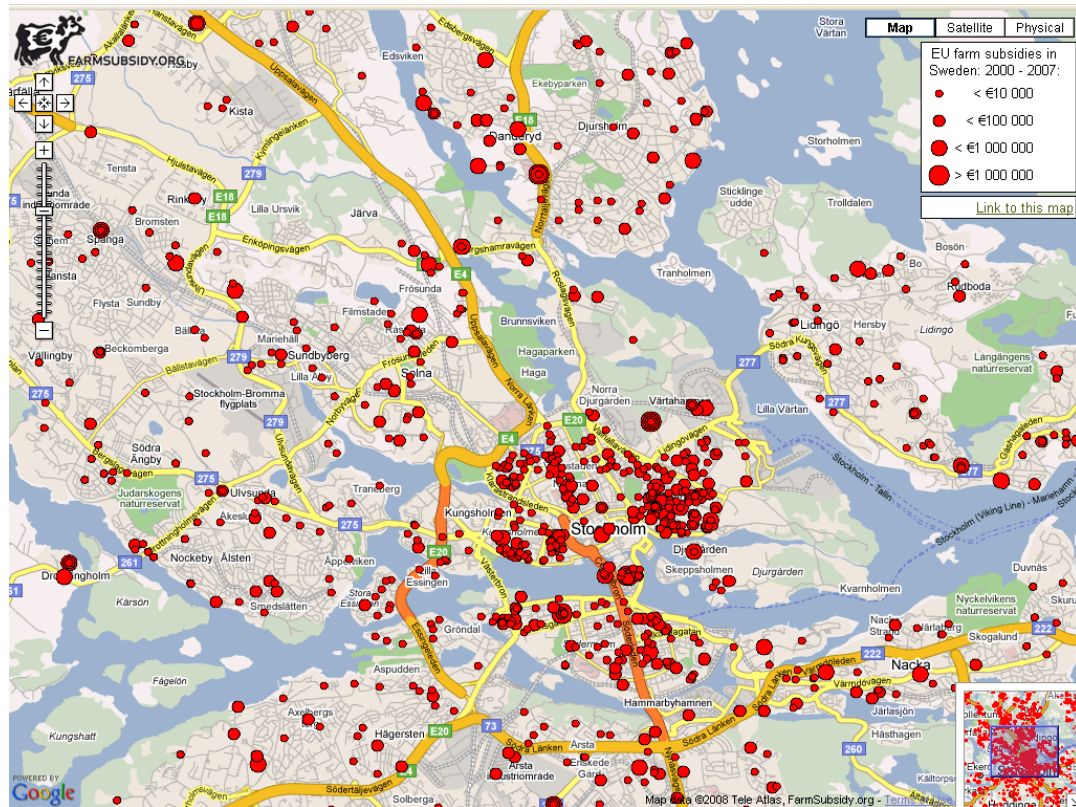
Transparency

Transparency is an area where there is strong external pressure for change. Sites such as “OMB Watch” (U.S.)⁴ and the work of the Sunlight Foundation⁵ demonstrate the public's thirst for user-friendly information about the actions of official bodies and elected representatives. Furthermore, these sites illustrate that it is often citizens themselves who are best placed to create the sites and tools that make public information come alive.

Generating citizen and media interest in the European Union's complicated agricultural subsidy program might seem an impossible task, but through its use of mashups that literally put the subsidies on the map, a small group of unpaid volunteers has succeeded in highlighting many unexpected aspects of the program. For example, it is interesting to see

how many subsidy recipients in a country such as Sweden live in towns (and, in particular, the capital of Stockholm) rather than in the countryside (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. A Mashup Created by a Volunteer Group, Farmsubsidy.Org, Shows Recipients of E.U. Common Agricultural Policy Subsidies Who Live in the Area Around the Swedish Capital of Stockholm



Source: <http://maps.farmsubsidy.org/sweden>

Sites where citizens have made imaginative use of official data highlight the loss of social and economic value when government-held data either is not made available at all, or is made available in unimaginative or restricted ways. The U.K. government sought to tackle this issue by setting up a taskforce whose aim was to tackle the barriers that prevent society from maximizing the value of public data.⁶ As part of its work, the Power of Information Taskforce ran a competition where citizens were invited to submit ideas on how they would use public data if it were available.⁷ Despite offering only a tiny financial prize, the competition generated hundreds of entries, with winners ranging from a mashup that would show the location of every postbox in the United Kingdom, to a site where citizens could input a postcode and see a map showing details of all recycling facilities in that area.

Transparency offers myriad benefits. Some of these relate to efficiency as information about performance and the availability of public-sector resources becomes more freely available. An obvious example is travel-related information, and many cities such as Amsterdam are already exploring innovative ways of making such information easily and conveniently available to citizens.⁸ These initiatives not only save people time—they also secure better use of public assets such as roads, buses, and trains.

Transparency can also provide a strong impetus for improved performance. Publication of information on how long each stage of an administrative process takes would offer a strong incentive for tackling bottlenecks and dealing with large variances in performance among different administrative offices. There are risks, of course, in moving in this direction. In some situations, the raw data can sometimes be misleading and used in ways that are neither fair nor informative. But the response should be to explain the data and explore what it actually tells us about the different dimensions of performance. The reality for all organizations is that there are many things that could and perhaps should be fixed, but are not addressed because they are difficult to do or because they never become a priority. Transparency can help give added urgency to issues that impact citizens and impel real change.

In addition to helping improve performance, transparency can contribute to a better relationship and greater trust among citizens and public institutions.

Much of people's cynicism about public-sector processes and decisions is fueled by their invisibility and complexity, and sometimes a combination of both. Take a simple example: when traffic lights are out at an intersection for a prolonged period, and there are traffic jams as a result, the natural reaction is to assume that those in charge have not given much thought to the impact of not repairing the traffic lights more quickly. But there may be good reasons for the delay—perhaps repairing them more quickly was impossible or would have cost three times as much. Making more information available about this type of mundane but practical situation need not be expensive or difficult, but can have a huge impact on how citizens feel about public-sector organizations and decision makers.

In a world where sharing information has become vastly easier, public agencies should aim to make as much information as possible available, and enable citizens to give feedback and view the feedback of others. Transparency about what others are saying to a public-sector organization is important, because other citizens can qualify the comments of others (agreeing or disagreeing with them), and because this enables discussion among citizens, providing a clearer picture of what citizens really think.

Ultimately, we should move toward a world where the information, analysis, and deliberation that influence key decisions are easily accessible. Further, we should aim for a world where it is both simple and appealing for citizens to give feedback at the point of contact in many of their day-to-day interactions with the public sector. Undoubtedly, we have much to learn about how to provide information and feedback opportunities in ways that will encourage citizens' participation. But if we want citizens who support and engage with public-sector institutions, we need to go in this direction.

Empowerment

Applying Web 2.0 tools and culture to the public sector suggests a new emphasis on empowering employees, citizens, and communities. The traditional e-government agenda of online services can make public-sector transactions more convenient and less time-consuming for citizens, but more radical change would involve enabling citizens to coproduce public services.

A simple example is the "FixMyStreet" website⁹ created by the U.K. charity mySociety. This site enables people to highlight problems on their streets (such as abandoned cars, potholes, broken streetlights, litter, etc.). The information (which often includes a photo) is

passed on automatically to the relevant local authority, and citizens (or the local authority) can update the entry when the problem is fixed.

Empowerment might also involve shifting some control directly to citizens. One form this can take is client-held budgets, as in the U.K.'s "In Control" project.¹⁰ This approach has been used by various local authorities to allow social-care clients to directly access the support they believe they need. Usually, if someone is eligible for local-authority funding, social workers devise a care plan that allocates to the individual the services that are paid for and commissioned by the local authority. It is rare for the individual to have much of a say in how services are designed. By contrast, self-directed services put the citizen at the center. Professionals help an individual assess his or her eligibility, and the person is then given an approximate budget to design services that make the most sense. Once the authority approves the plan, the money flows to the individual and on to the service providers of his or her choice. A similar reform is being developed in Western Australia for people with disabilities, including the introduction of individualized funding programs (<http://www.disability.wa.gov.au/Research/PublicSearchView.aspx?pid=75>).

Empowerment can also mean encouraging community self-help. An interesting example is the Southwark Circle Project in the London borough of Southwark. Instead of focusing on an unmet need for public services, this project explored how a locality might mobilize public, private, voluntary, and community resources to help older people define and create quality of life and well-being for themselves. This involved a radical change in the way resources were defined (not just financial resources, but other assets such as skills and networks) and the way services were configured (away from a near-exclusive focus on care and toward building relationships and participation). Following two months of user research, Participle—the consultancy firm leading this initiative—set up a cooperative social enterprise that will help people build social relationships and provide services to each other—some on a paid-for basis, others voluntary. The cooperative will also source some services externally.¹¹

Conclusion

Collaboration has always been a function of good government. The need to talk to other agencies or to groups of experts and citizens in the course of developing policy or regulations, or when designing and delivering services, has always been a hallmark of effective government.

But some things have changed. One is the sheer range of interests, organizations, and individuals who are part of the collaboration process. Another is the pace and rate at which collaboration has to happen.

There is renewed interest in drawing more heavily on the insights of citizens themselves, especially where they have direct experience with services. An example is the Patient Opinion website, established by a general practitioner in Great Britain who wanted to find a way for National Health Service patients to share experiences regarding the care they received.

Solving public problems requires new combinations of experience and insight, enabled by easy access to convenient and appealing ways to talk, argue, design, test, and then scale solutions. Open and connected governance assumes an ability to find people rapidly, connect them in purposeful conversations, give them access to the right mix of knowledge

and ideas (to which they will then contribute), and keep them working productively in ever-more complex and shifting coalitions of interest and practice.

The people and expertise needed to make this model work will be anywhere and everywhere. Often, they won't be in large institutions or traditional organizations (private, public, or community). They will be in smaller, more distributed networks that come together to solve problems or share ideas. Much of the invention and inspiration for change will come from the edge, rather than the center, where people live and work and receive services that have often outgrown the contours of their lives or are not delivering the value people and communities need. The confidence to learn by sharing is often nurtured in small, local, highly connected places and communities where trust is high and tolerance for diversity and intelligent failure is similarly strong. Engaging with citizens becomes a vital part of building social capital, which, in turn, powers innovation.

Creative use of social networking and collaborative technologies is already impacting the way people think and act on "public purpose" issues. But we know that moving toward an open and transparent public sector will not be easy. Nonetheless, if we want to build a society where citizens feel closer to their public institutions and more in control of these institutions' impact on their day-to-day lives, we need to build a model of government that learns from, and learns to adapt to, the more-connected world in which citizens now live.

Endnotes

1. "Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations," Clay Shirky, The Penguin Press, 2008.
2. <http://www.rightsnet.org.uk/>
3. <http://groups.google.co.uk/group/BarcampUKGovweb>
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11. <http://www.southwarkcircle.org.uk/>

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More Information

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