

Commonwealth Innovations



Nigerian dignitaries and honoured guests at the *Good Governance, Accountability & Trust* conference, Abuja, Nigeria, May 2010

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Unlocking Government: How Data will Transform Democracy

Enhancing public services requires more openness, not more technology

The rapid proliferation of web 2.0 applications, along with the associated explosion of social media channels, has promised to revolutionize the way governments operate. Real world examples already abound demonstrating the ways in which the advent of new technologies have made it easier for public sector organizations to share information, solicit citizen feedback and respond by improving public services.

In New York City, for instance, the Citywide Performance Reporting (CPR) site gives citizens access to approximately 300 performance measures for more than 40 city agencies. City officials can also use CPR to quickly access information that can help them run the city more effectively.

In the District of Columbia, citizens can earn public recognition and cash prizes for designing applications that use government data in innovative ways. In the 2009 competition, for example, the first-place winner combined iPhone access and a Facebook application that lets users submit requests to fix potholes, broken parking meters and other problems.

In New South Wales, Australia, a member of state parliament established a social networking site to crowdsource ideas about how to invest the A\$300,000 available to his electoral district. Individual community groups, such as scout troops, sports clubs, school groups and volunteer fire brigades have posted proposals for using portions of the funds, some with videos to support their applications.

Paul Macmillan is Deloitte's Canadian Public Sector Industry Leader and a member of Deloitte's Global Public Sector leadership team. Paul's consulting area of expertise is public sector transformation. His experience spans the major trends of citizen service, performance management, e-government, integrated service delivery and network government.

For its part, Revenu Québec aggregates financial information from various government departments and businesses to combat tax evasion. Based on the project, between 2003 and 2008, the agency recovered \$189 million in additional revenue.

Still falling behind

These examples are only the tip of the iceberg. In cities and states, territories and countries around the world, public sector organizations are displaying exceptional levels of ingenuity in leveraging today's technologies. Yet, according to our recent report, *Unlocking government: How data transforms democracy*, a critical challenge still remains. Despite government forays into the web 2.0 world, most public sector organizations are failing to keep pace with today's constantly evolving social media norms.

Even when it comes to non-personal information, many organizations hesitate to release transaction data, making it difficult to achieve the

level of transparency many public stakeholders now expect. Data often remain available only in hard copy, or are dispersed across so many agency websites that they can't be easily accessed or manipulated. Incompatible formatting hinders citizens' ability to extract useful knowledge from the raw data. And weak search protocols frequently prevent stakeholders from locating key information - or even confirming that it exists.

The slower progress in some jurisdictions reveals a fundamental gap in the way public sector organizations are deploying emerging technologies. Notably, the challenge is not related to the technologies themselves. Private businesses are using the very same technologies to completely alter the ways in which they communicate with their customers, employees, investors, shareholders and regulators. Instead, the root of the problem can be found in government's long-standing tendency to hoard information. Public sector leaders are doomed to continue falling further behind the times unless they embrace a new culture of openness.

Exploring the elements of open government

Governments are no strangers to the concepts of transparency and accountability. For decades, public servants have understood the imperatives of reporting on their financial conduct and explaining how their actions affect program outcomes. However, the culture of openness required of governments in today's digital world extends far beyond these activities. To respond to growing citizen demands to open up data and information, government leaders will need to completely alter their traditional mindsets.

A prime example of how governments are working to become more open are seen in places like the U.S federal

government site Recovery.gov. Here, citizens can find project level data on the status of stimulus projects and also provide input on future projects, as well as suspected waste, fraud and abuse. With billions of dollars at stake, citizens are acutely interested in knowing how the money is being spent and whether or not it is achieving its goal to rekindle economic growth.

Given the scope of the changes required, mistakes are bound to happen. However, leading government agencies are no longer afford to be paralyzed by this possibility. The U.K. government's recent launch of the Combined Online Information System (COINS) is providing unprecedented data disclosure from the government's central accounting system. The database holds over 24 million items. In April 2010, the government released one year's worth of data, some 3.2 million items. This level of granularity combined, for example, with the Royal Mail's decision to release the longitude and latitude coordinates of postal codes, will provide unprecedented transparency of where public funds are being spent.

What we are learning is that by embracing openness, governments can:

- strengthen the democratic process by providing citizens with freer access to data
- raise the level of public debate by helping citizens become more informed about the issues that affect them on a day-to-day basis
- share critical community data, such as demographics, criminal activity, real estate values, transportation resources, natural features, public health and more
- improve service levels by providing constituents with open access to the performance data of local agencies, such as schools and hospitals

At the same time, an open source approach to data can empower citizens to play a role in improving information accuracy. A review of public data by thousands, or even millions, of eyeballs raises the likelihood of identifying problems or inconsistencies that auditors and inspectors may otherwise miss. Taking this one step further, governments can even ask citizens to go beyond identifying errors by actually applying their imagination towards developing innovative uses of public data. This is where the new culture of openness starts to get really interesting.

Let users design

There is little doubt that governments still fear the consequences of opening up access to data that traditionally have not been accessible. To allay that fear, it helps to understand the extent to which the interplay between governments and the public can foster innovation. By inviting citizens to make creative use of public data, many governments are already uncovering new applications and value from their data that they would never have developed on their own.

This approach is being modeled on the spectacular success in the private sector. When Apple first released the iPod and iPhone, it opened up its platform to developers. The resulting explosion of applications, which has sparked millions of downloads, continues to fuel the popularity of Apple's devices and brings greater value to its customers than the company could have offered on its own.

This lesson should not be lost on governments. By making government data available to programmers, designers and developers in both the private and not-for-profit sectors, governments can effectively outsource the development of innovative

applications to their users. There have already been early successes. Some agencies have introduced competitions, with monetary rewards, to incent citizens to invent new ways to apply public data.

Even without these incentives, citizens are responding. In Toronto, for instance, riders of the city's transit system were having difficulty accessing up-to-date schedules and route information. To address this challenge, a group of developers decided to mash-up available data to provide the public with scheduling information. Understanding the value of this application, the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) incorporated it into its websites.

By unleashing this sea of user creativity, governments gain more than access to a virtually unlimited number of innovative applications. They can also foster greater inter-agency collaboration, strengthen their relationships with citizen developers and conserve the resources that would otherwise be required to combine data from across multiple jurisdictions. At the same time, they gain an unprecedented opportunity to engage citizens in unlocking the power of public data.

This is not to suggest that challenges don't exist. The cultural change required of public sector stakeholders is significant. Traditionally, data are owned by program managers within an organization. Even within the walls of government, it can be difficult to share data across program areas. Before governments can effectively leverage the full potential of citizen innovation, they need to understand the different ways in which they can use social media networks to access and share key data.

Become part of the conversation

As the move towards more open government continues its relentless pace, public sector leaders are coming to understand that they can tap into the on-line conversations about the effectiveness of public policy decisions. Public sector leaders can make themselves more accessible to citizens by engaging in conversations already taking place across social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. This is not about "big brother" monitoring citizen interactions. Instead, it's about enabling real, unfiltered conversations between public and private sector constituents.

This is particularly imperative in an environment where many agencies lack large PR budgets or the means to disseminate critical information quickly. By turning to social media networks, governments can more easily share information with concerned citizens and even respond to emergency situations or crises. A great example can be found at the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) which recently relied on social media networks to disseminate information about a product recall. By using this means of communication, the agency was able to reach more people in a shorter time than ever before.

Governments can also participate in social media dialogues as a way to solicit feedback about the effectiveness of their programs and services. By getting a pulse on how citizens feel about government programs, agencies can better position themselves to respond to evolving expectations and requirements. This has the powerful potential to create more responsive government.

For instance, when the government of Ontario proposed new legislation to place stronger conditions on young drivers in 2008, a Facebook group,

called Young Drivers Against New Ontario Laws, sprang up almost immediately, attracting 200 members within hours and eventually exceeding 140,000. By relying on this reaction as one gauge of public opinion, the government was able to respond by amending the most restrictive aspects of the legislation.

By using social networks to 'push' and 'pull' information in this way, governments gain the unmatched opportunity to:

- evaluate public opinion on every topic imaginable
- obtain near-real-time feedback on policy
- 'crowdsource' ideas by creating forums for public collaboration
- identify and resolve service delivery problems by aggregating citizen input on government services
- communicate emergency information to the public more efficiently

Of course, to make information available in this way, governments must first free the data that is currently trapped deep within their transactional systems. This is where data mining and data analytics come in.

Turn data into insight

As governments engage in transformative projects to upgrade their legacy systems, an opportunity exists to streamline access to data across multiple program areas. By allowing citizens to more effectively analyze information in real time, governments can begin to uncover the insights that come from understanding complex data relationships across seemingly unrelated areas. For instance, by combining geographic data, census data, land use information, crime incident reports and other information, police departments

in England and Wales have vastly enhanced their ability to map crime trends in neighbourhoods.

To succeed at this effort, however, governmental data policy must turn inward. No matter how effectively governments learn to mine social networking data and leverage the data manipulation skills of the public, there will remain the need to develop a strong internal core competency in data analytics—the capability to share and manipulate their own data, as well as the masses of unstructured data to be culled from the web.

If the unlocking of public data is to deliver the greatest possible value, and have a genuinely revolutionary effect on the relationship between governments and citizens, data analytics must become a core competency for most agencies. By investing in the right data analysis software, people and processes, smart governments can:

- make sense of disparate information to fine-tune and increase the effectiveness of services
- combat fraud by combining and analyzing social and financial information provided by government departments, organizations and private businesses
- take an evidence-based approach to demonstrating the effectiveness of their public policy decisions

To achieve these kinds of results, data analytics must be seen as more than a helpful tool or a compartmentalized service. Rather, it must extend across and throughout the organization and be driven by its core mission. The culture of localized data ownership, held over from the days when governments were reticent to share data, even within their own walls, will have to be overcome to extract maximum value.

Turning concept into reality

While fully embracing open government will require significant cultural change among public sector leaders, the challenges are by no means insurmountable. Governments can begin by adopting some of the best practices that already exist.

For instance, to facilitate openness, government agencies need to collaborate more effectively to move their data online and make them available in accessible formats. They should tell the public about what they are doing as well in an effort to encourage citizens to use and manipulate the information as it becomes available.

To enhance innovation, governments should seek and maintain relationships with application developers as a way to encourage users to create new applications using public data. To incent this behaviour, agencies can hold contests, incorporate user-designed applications into their websites and otherwise formalize channels for data interaction designed to foster greater collaboration.

To encourage government responsiveness, public sector leaders should systematically monitor what citizens are saying about their programs and take steps to participate in the dialogue by using social media networks more effectively. In this process, this can position themselves to acquire valuable data that will enable them to refine their programs in response to evolving citizen needs.

Finally, to support the emergence of smarter governments, agencies need to turn data analytics into a core competency. This can be accomplished by both enlisting key public sector partners and relying on the online community to mash up data in innovative ways.

By unlocking public data in these ways, governments can do more to foster stronger citizen interactions, respond to proliferating demands for greater transparency and gain access to virtually unlimited ideas for the application of their data. They can also use the movement towards greater openness as a way to transform democracy itself - truly supporting a culture where insights are shared by the people, for the people.