

Unsatisfactory Progress

The Bush Administration's Performance on E-Government Initiatives

By Robert D. Atkinson

E-government—the delivery of government services through digital information technologies, including the Internet—is an important part of reinventing government that not only reduces the cost of government, but also significantly improves the quality of services and citizen access. When George Bush took office in January 2001, the United States enjoyed the distinction of being the global leader in e-government, according to a survey of national e-government efforts.¹ In three years, we have fallen behind Canada and are tied for second place with Singapore; and other nations are closing in fast. Of 18 other nations ranked, 13 have made faster progress since 2001, and many are poised to pass the United States within the next year.

As other nations have raced ahead in e-government, the Bush administration has made, at best, halting progress. For example, less than 60 percent of federal transactions were available online by the October 2003 deadline established under the 1999 Government Paperwork Elimination Act.² Meanwhile, the administration proposed 25 e-government initiatives—with 91 specific objectives—of which only 33 had been fully or substantially achieved as of March 2004, according to the General Accounting Office.³ Moreover, the government has done little to market the e-government services it has developed, so few Americans are even aware of them and even fewer use them.⁴ For example, only 8 percent of Americans have visited *recreation.gov* and only 5 percent have been to

benefits.gov—both signature Bush administration e-government initiatives.⁵ Even federal agencies do not use the Bush administration's e-government services. For example, the Environmental Protection Agency, the lead government agency for the Bush administration's e-rulemaking initiative (a website that lets citizens and businesses file comments on administrative rulemaking), does not post most of its own regulations to the site for comment. Even the Bush administration admits that progress is lacking. According to the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), only five agencies have met established criteria for success in e-government, with nine agencies receiving failing grades, and another 12 receiving “mixed results.”⁶ While the administration deserves credit for honestly

“One person with a belief is a social power equal to ninety-nine who have only interests.”

—John Stuart Mill

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assessing its own e-government efforts, it would deserve more credit if they had made more progress.

Why has the United States fallen behind under the Bush administration? In large part, the administration itself has failed to make a serious commitment to transforming the federal government through information technology. When the administration took office, many e-government experts expected more. During the 2000 campaign, Bush adopted several promising e-government proposals, including the Progressive Policy Institute’s idea of creating a chief information officer (CIO) for the federal government, and the idea of establishing a \$100 million annual interagency e-government fund.⁷ But, instead of creating a top-level CIO as PPI proposed—or as Sen. Joe Lieberman (D-Conn.),

the chief sponsor of the E-government Act of 2002 wanted⁸—the administration appointed only a mid-level position within OMB, in part because of resistance from its own top OMB officials.⁹ And the White House never asked for the full \$100 million that Bush promised in the 2000 campaign. In its FY05 budget request, the administration sought just \$5 million for the interagency e-government fund, having settled for just \$3 million from Congress in FY04.¹⁰ Indeed, it has done little to persuade congressional appropriators that cross-agency programs are more effective than the current committee-by-committee funding structure, or to address congressional concerns that the money was not being spent well.

The administration has failed to develop an overall e-government plan detailing where

they want to go and how they want to get there.¹¹ In place of a coherent plan, it has developed a laundry list of discrete e-government projects. Moreover, when it has selected initiatives for investment, the administration has used the narrow selection criteria of government cost savings, instead of the more appropriate one of total savings to government, businesses, state and local governments, and citizens.¹²

Apologists for the Bush administration's lack of progress might argue that the administration has had its hands full with the war on terror and, as a result, e-government has had to take a back seat. But unfortunately, the administration has made little progress even in using information for homeland security—an area it claims is a top priority. Almost three years since the 9-11 terrorist attacks, the administration has still not completed the integration of the dozen terrorist watch lists currently spread over nine agencies, even though a top-level administration official consulted by this author has described that integration as a simple technological task. The administration has made even less progress in creating an integrated, systemwide terrorist information and analysis network of the kind proposed by the Markle Foundation Task Force on National Security in the Information Age.¹³

How to Revitalize Federal E-Government Efforts

Getting our nation's e-government efforts on track will be an important task of the next administration. Ultimately, e-government progress is dependent on the commitment and support of top-level leadership, which has been lacking in the Bush administration. But regardless of who leads the next administration, the first step is to develop a detailed strategic plan for what is to be accomplished over the next several years. Here are seven steps that should be included in that plan:

1. Make e-government a key priority by appointing a federal CIO.

A major reason why Canada ranks number one in e-government is that it has created an influential CIO position in the Treasury Secretariat.¹⁴ Likewise, many provinces have made significant progress because most have a CIO that reports to the governor. Having a lead CIO allows the entire government to make customer-centered e-government a priority.

2. Provide funding for cross-agency e-government initiatives.

Taking e-government to the next level requires breaking down bureaucratic barriers and creating a citizen-centered and enterprise-wide (as opposed to agency-specific) federal e-government presence.¹⁵ Normally, this means funding cross-cutting initiatives that go beyond individual agencies. Canada is an e-government leader because it allocates significant funding toward enterprise-wide efforts. In FY03 alone, the Treasury Board of Canada's CIO spent \$225.7 million on cross-cutting e-government initiatives, including secure infrastructure; common portals, policies and standards; and online service delivery.¹⁶ In the United States, Congress and the administration should fully implement the E-government Act of 2002 and appropriate \$100 million per year to the interagency e-government fund.

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3. Transform FirstGov.gov from a set of Web links to a true online portal.

In order to create a customer-centered Web portal for the entire government, the Clinton administration developed *Firstgov.gov* in 2000. *Firstgov.gov* took an important step in the right direction by linking a large share of federal government websites. But to be a true citizen-centered portal, it needed to evolve beyond just listing Web links to creating truly integrated Web portals where content is developed around the needs of citizens. While the Bush administration has made some progress on this, the *Firstgov.gov* site still largely consists of Web links. For example, on the “Education, Jobs and Volunteerism” page, the “adult education” option connects to a Department of Education website that seems to relate only to college for teens.¹⁷ There is

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no site with information for Department of Labor training programs. When citizens click on “home buying” on *Firstgov.gov*, they are sent not to a reengineered site that has all of the available federal help for home buying, or even to a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) site on home buying, but rather to the HUD homepage where, they must sort through another set of links to find the right information. Even when the government has developed subject-specific portals, like *Export.gov*, those sites still reflect their origins as a collection of disparate websites.¹⁸ It is as if government is saying, “We’re customer-focused—we’ve published

an easy-to-use directory of all our individual agency-centric programs.” But Web links do not constitute integration.

In contrast, other governments have taken steps to create truly integrated and independent Web portals where content is developed especially for the portal around the needs of citizens. For example, Great Britain’s *Direct.gov.uk* is an easy-to-use portal that contains a site designed to help disabled persons find information and resources they need.¹⁹ Canada has used its portal to provide IT-enabled tools. For example, Canada’s online Interactive Export Planner helps entrepreneurs prepare an export plan for their business.²⁰ Likewise, its “Interactive Business Planner” helps firms prepare three-year business plans and offers sample plans and financial projection tools for many types of businesses. For workers seeking education, Canada’s Jobs, Workers, Training and Career portal offers integrated information and services for Canadians looking for work, exploring career options, developing a learning plan, or dealing with a workplace issue. The portal also includes online career planning software and an e-learning tool.²¹

4. Create intergovernmental Web portals.

Customer-centered e-government requires moving from separate departmental websites to a seamless Internet presence, organized around citizens’ needs. To make this work, integration must occur not only between agencies, but also between different tiers of government and with the private sector.

Citizens do not much care what level of government they are dealing with; they just want answers. Yet, the federal government has done little to create integrated websites that contain comprehensive federal and state information.²² For example, a business looking for sources of financing would be directed to the U.S. Small

Business Administration, not to a list of all government-supported business financing programs—federal, state, and local—based on zip code.

Other nations, particularly Canada, have taken systematic steps to provide one-stop services. For many of its applications, the Canadian government has created websites that seamlessly integrate federal and provincial government information. For example, its “Business Start-Up Assistant” is an integrated portal to federal, provincial, and private-sector information on how to start a business. It provides this information by region, and includes business registration forms as well as up-to-date market research.²³ Entrepreneurs in British Columbia, for example, can go to one website and fill out online all the forms they need to start a business.²⁴ Consumers can also go online to get federal and provincial information regarding consumer protection issues.²⁵ Washington needs to take intergovernmental e-government seriously and begin a major initiative in these and other areas.

5. Develop new, innovative e-government applications.

The Internet enables people to conduct existing types of transactions with government better and more quickly. But it also enables government to develop entirely new applications to serve citizen’s needs. The next administration should make a serious effort to identify and develop these new applications. Some possibilities are:

- Allowing citizens to report white-collar economic crime online;²⁶
- Creating a “G-bay” online auction whereby citizens can bid on government surplus items;²⁷

- Creating an online comprehensive registry of all clinical health trials and their results; and
- Developing an online literacy training tool.²⁸

6. Boost e-democracy.

One thing citizens want from e-government is the ability to find out more information about how decisions are made by the White House and Congress.²⁹ Yet, while the federal government has made some progress, the opportunities for enhancing e-democracy are significant. For example, while it is possible to find congressional votes on particular floor bills, it is difficult to sort through them, with no easy way to aggregate bills or votes. Likewise, while some meetings in Washington are open to the public, few people can attend. As a result, Congress and the president should take several steps to enhance e-democracy, including:

- Enhancing the Library of Congress “Thomas” system to put it on par with the Legislative Information System used by congressional staff;
- Creating a user-friendly congressional voting portal that makes it easy for citizens to find voting records of members, sorted by bill names and type, including committee votes; and
- Requiring that all federal public meetings be available for viewing online.

7. Ask citizens what they want.

A final reason Canada is an e-government leader is that the Canadian government conducts regular surveys asking citizens what they want to see online,³⁰ and has established an online advisory panel to help guide its efforts. In addition, some Canadian government websites include an

online feedback form that lets citizens score the site, suggest changes, and point out problems, such as bad links.³¹ The U.S. government should emulate these efforts and systematically solicit citizen input on e-governments initiatives.

Conclusion

In spite of what some naysayers claim, the

digital revolution is alive and well. Each year more Americans get online, subscribe to broadband, and conduct business over the Internet. Companies continue to develop and improve Web offerings, providing even more value to Internet users. It is important that the federal government is not left behind in this process, and instead takes full advantage of the Internet to create a government that works better and costs less.

Endnotes

¹ "eGovernment Leadership: High Performance, Maximum Value," Accenture, May 2004, http://www.accenture.com/xd/xd.asp?it=enweb&xd=industries\government\gove_egov_value.xml.

² Michael, Sara, "Agencies Cut Paper," *Federal ComputerWeek*, March 11, 2004, <http://www.fcw.com/fcw/articles/2004/0308/web-gpea-03-11-04.asp>.

³ Koontz, Linda D., "Electronic Government: Initiatives Sponsored by the OMB have Made Mixed Progress," *Government Accounting Office*, March 2004.

⁴ Princeton Survey Research Associates, "April 2004 Omnibus Survey," *The E-Gov Institute*, May 5, 2004, <http://www.fcw.com/fcwdownload/pdf/ToplineSurvey.pdf>.

⁵ It would be an easy step to put the web address for *recreation.gov* on all national park brochures, but the Park Service has not done this. Likewise, there is no web link to *recreation.gov* on most national park websites or even on an "e-parks" newsletter that goes out to web subscribers (<http://www.eparks.com/eparks/newsletter7.pdf>). This lack of integrated marketing is not confined to the National Park Service, few federal agencies market their web presence.

⁶ "E-Gov Scorecard," *The Executive Branch Management Service*, <http://www.results.gov/agenda/scorecard.html>.

⁷ Atkinson, Robert D. and Jacob Ulevich, "Digital Government: The Next Step to Reengineering the Federal Government," *Progressive Policy Institute*, March 1, 2000, <http://www.ppionline.org>.

⁸ Sen. Lieberman had initially wanted to create a Chief Information Officer (CIO) for the entire federal government, either as a deputy director of the Office and Management and Budget (OMB), or as head of a new Office of Information Policy within OMB.

⁹ The leading opponent to the creation of a federal CIO was Sean O'Keefe, then-deputy director of OMB for Management. In truly questionable reasoning, he argued that a strong CIO might give agency chiefs a reason "to dismiss their responsibility" for the success or failure of agencies' IT projects, (Matthews, William, "Bush e-gov Fund to Double," March 26, 2001, *FCW.com*, <http://www.fcw.com/fcw/articles/2001/0326/news-fund-03-26-01.asp>).

¹⁰ In negotiations with the Senate on the E-Gov Act of 2002, the administration agreed to ask for \$100 million in FY04 for the interagency fund.

¹¹ The federal Chief Information Officers Council has developed what they refer to as a strategic plan, but it is quite limited in its scope, ("Strategic Plan: Fiscal Year 2004," *CIO Council*, February 2004, http://cio.gov/documents/cio_council_strategic_plan_fy04.pdf).

¹² For example, an online application might not save the government much money, but it could save citizens and businesses considerable amounts.

¹³ Markle Foundation Task Force on National Security in the Information Age, <http://www.markletaskforce.org>.

¹⁴ Chief Information Officer Branch, Government of Canada, http://www.cio-dpi.gc.ca/cio-dpi/index_e.asp.

¹⁵ Atkinson, Robert D. and Andrew Leigh, "Breaking Down the Bureaucratic Barriers: The Next Phase of Digital Government," *Progressive Policy Institute*, November 27, 2001, <http://www.ppionline.org>.

¹⁶ "Government On-Line: 2003," *The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat*, 2003, http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/report/gol-ged/2003/dwnld/gol-ged_e.pdf.

¹⁷ Instead, we are shown a link to a speech by the Secretary of Education on the economy (U.S. Department of Education,

<http://www.ed.gov/index.jhtml>).

¹⁸ For example, *recall.gov* is a good example of an idea that is good in theory (an integrated website for consumers to track all product recalls), but because of agency resistance, was not developed into an integrated, enterprise-wide portal.

¹⁹ “Disabled People and Careers,” *Directgov*, <http://www.direct.gov.uk/Audiences/DisabledPeopleAndCarers/fs/en>.

²⁰ “With the Interactive Export Planner, you will: be guided through each section of your plan using a question and answer format; learn definitions and tips, and view sample plans to help you to write your own plan; have financial projections prepared for you, based upon the information you provide; and use the power of the Internet to assist you in researching your export plan or business plan,” (“Interactive Export Planner,” *Government of Canada*, http://prodt.businesscanada.gc.ca/exporter/Eng/app_templates/home_en.cfm).

²¹ *JobsEtc.ca*, <http://www.jobsetc.ca>.

²² One area where the federal government has made progress is with *recreation.gov*, which lists both state and federal parks.

²³ “Business Start-Up Assistant, Registration Forms for Alberta,” <http://bsa.cbasc.org/gol/bsa/interface.nsf/engdoc/1.8.4.html#a4>.

²⁴ “OneStop Business Registration, British Columbia,” <http://www.onestopbc.ca/OSEB01.do?method=present>.

²⁵ Canadian Consumer Information Gateway, <http://www.consumerinformation.ca/cgi-bin/main.cgi?Language=E>.

²⁶ The Canadian government now provides the Reporting Economic Crime On-Line (RECOL) System. To use RECOL, individuals first create a secure profile that only they can access. They then submit their complaint, which is forwarded to the appropriate law enforcement agency. The website also includes tips about providing evidence. One of the key benefits of RECOL is the opportunity to interact anonymously with the police, whether Canadians are seeking information or would like to submit a complaint. Over time, this anonymity will encourage more individuals to report the economic crimes they have witnessed, contributing to greater public safety (“Frauds Scams Alerts,” *Reporting Economic Crime Online*, <https://www.recol.ca/fraudprevention.aspx>).

²⁷ Canadians who want to purchase surplus public sector equipment and material can visit the Crown Assets Distribution website (<http://crownassets.pwpsc.gc.ca/search/regcom-e.cfm?Language=ENGLISH>), which includes sales schedules, pictures, and descriptions of featured items, and an email notification feature alerting clients when items of interest are available for purchase. Through increased sales, this online service has allowed the government of Canada to reduce the number of warehouses containing surplus material, resulting in cost savings of about \$3 million per year.

²⁸ In response to concerns about the impact of pharmaceutical industry sponsorship on research outcome, quality, and publication bias, the American Medical Association House of Delegates recently called for the Department of Health and Human Services to establish a comprehensive registry for all clinical trials conducted in the United States. The new registry would ensure that trials with negative as well as positive results are publicly available, by providing every clinical trial with a unique identification and ensuring publication or placement on an electronic database of all results from registered trials.

²⁹ “e-Government: The Next American Revolution,” *The Council for Excellence in Government*, Sept 28, 2000, <http://www.excelgov.org/displayContent.asp?Keyword=ppp092800>. “The survey measures public reactions to several examples of e-government in action, covering various levels of government and a variety of public-sector functions. Majorities of adults express a favorable view of every e-government function tested, including majorities very favorable toward most functions. Among the most popular examples are the ability to get medical information from NIH and other agencies (80 percent favorable), the ability to view candidates’ voting records (77 percent), access to Social Security benefit information (73 percent), cost savings produced by on-line motor vehicle registration (71 percent), and on-line student loan applications (70 percent).”

³⁰ For example, most recently, the top thing Canadians wanted was contact information for individual agencies (“Government On-Line: 2004,” *The Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat*, http://www.gol-ged.gc.ca/rpt2004/rpt02_e.asp).

³¹ For example, the Government On-Line feedback form, http://www.gol-ged.gc.ca/cioscripts/help/feedback-commentaires_e.asp?who=/.