



Government Performance Workshop: October 15, 2008

Accountability through Technology

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Paper prepared for the Government Performance Workshop
October 15, 2008

*Sponsored by the Georgetown Public Policy Institute (GPPI), Accenture and
OMB Watch*

Accountability through Technology

In 2006, citizens harnessed the power of the Internet to make Congress pass a bill that required the government to post publicly all of its financial transactions. This is what happened. Senators Tom Coburn and Barack Obama, along with Congressmen Roy Blunt and Tom Davis, were working on a bill to require Internet posting of information about all government transactions. As it meandered through the legislative process, word got out that one or a couple of Senators were blocking Senate consideration of the bill. An odd coalition of left and right leaning blogs ([Porkbusters](#), [GOPProgress](#), and TPMmuckraker, to name a few) prompted readers to contact those Senators holding the bill and express outrage. The Senators subsequently relented, withdrew their objections, and the bill became law.

This case shows that if citizens have information they can use, they will. And government will respond. USASpending.gov, the site the law created, is visited by thousands of Americans every day. Legislation winding its way through Congress promises to expand the amount of information on the site even more. States are adopting their own public transaction reporting sites. Today, American citizens have more information about government operations than ever before.

Greater transparency is inevitable. Too often, though, the information isn't produced in a form that's accessible to citizens. Until it is, there is little chance citizens will use it to make their government more accountable. Technology can bridge the gap between information available today and information that citizens can use. Then it's up to them.

What information is available today?

The Internet has made it easy for government to report what it wants to report. Some of what's available today:

- Federal transactions. Because of the law discussed above, [www.USASpending.gov](#) was launched. The site reports contracts, grants, loans, or any other financial transactions entered into by a Federal agency. The site allows visitors to search millions of transactions easily.
- Program performance. The website [www.ExpectMore.gov](#) includes detailed assessments of the management and performance of more than 1000 Federal programs that account for \$2.6 trillion in spending. The site posts all of the evidence on which the assessments are based, as well as performance data, funding history, and improvement plans for every federal government program.

- Budgets, Audits, Performance Plans, and Reports. The Office of Management and Budget has made it easy to find key agency performance and financial documents. They're all available at www.omb.gov/part/agency_performance_addresses.html.
- Agency Transparency. Want to know more about what and how an agency is doing? Go to its website. All of the Department of Homeland Security's accountability information can be found at www.dhs.gov/xabout/budget/gc_1214235565991.shtm. Labor's can be found at www.dol.gov/dol/aboutdol/. At those sites you'll find a one-stop-shop for budgets, reports, audits, investigations, plans to address major management challenges, program reviews, etc.
- Research and Development. www.science.gov, a website that searches over 36 databases and 1,850 selected websites, offers 200 million pages of authoritative U.S. government science information, including research and development results.
- Benefits. www.govbenefits.gov provides a single point of access for citizens to locate and determine potential eligibility for government benefits and services; and www.GovLoans.gov, creates a single point of access for citizens to locate information on federal loan programs, and improves back-office loan functions as well.
- Agency Rulemaking. www.regulations.gov gives Americans the opportunity to find, view, and comment on Federal regulations and other Federal actions at one website.

There is no shortage of information available. But government's not the best at making its websites user-friendly. OMB made a series of changes to make it easier to find information on ExpectMore.gov. For instance, assessments and summaries of the assessments used to be published in pdf. Today, they are published in the more easy-to-search html. Visitors can now search by agency or program rating or program type. There you can also access agency strategic plans, performance plans, and performance reports. Still, the accessibility and usability of Expectmore.gov could be improved.

The accessibility and usability of much of the information government publishes could be improved. Those wanting to access information at these sites should be able to do so easily. Unfortunately, the quality of and customer satisfaction with these sites don't match that of the private sector. For instance, it may be difficult for visitors to find a particular rule on [regulations.gov](http://www.regulations.gov). Likewise, a researcher may need to know a program's name to get access to all the relevant assessment information on ExpectMore.gov. To be truly transparent, information must not only be available, it should also be easily accessible.

Signs of Greater Collaboration

In addition to improving access to information about government operations, technology has also improved the extent of government collaboration with the public. Blogs, an on-line conversation among active participants, are proliferating.

- Employees of the Environmental Protection Agency share ideas with the public on the nation's quest to improve the environment on the agency's official blog, Greenversations. (<http://blog.epa.gov/blog/about/>)
- The Transportation Security Administration operates a blog, Evolution of Security. (<http://www.tsa.gov/blog/labels/shoes.html>) The blog's tag line: "Terrorists Evolve. Threats Evolve. Security Must Stay Ahead. You Play A Part." The site facilitates "an ongoing dialogue on innovations in security, technology and the checkpoint screening process" and has actually contributed to changes in the screening process that, while enhancing airline passenger convenience, do not diminish security.
- The Intelligence Community is solving common problems by collaborating on a wiki, Intellipedia. There, intelligence officials share information on some of the most difficult subjects facing U.S. intelligence. Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell has cited the increasing use of Intellipedia among analysts and its ability to help experts pool their knowledge, form virtual teams, and make quick assessments.
- Thousands of Federal employees are sharing information and collaborating across agencies on common challenges in a collaborative on-line community, the MAX Federal Community "Wiki" website. Though not open to the public, employees from different agencies share documents and work on common solutions to similar problems, like food safety, human capital management, or information technology administration.

Clearly, Americans have greater access to more information about government operations than at any point in history. Despite this transparency, Americans' trust in government is at a historic low. Just 48% of Americans say they have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the government's ability to handle domestic problems, according to the Gallup organization's annual governance survey. Polls also show Americans think their government is too secretive. Seventy-four percent of Americans think the Federal government is very or somewhat secretive, up from 62 percent in 2006, according to a Sunshine Week survey by Scripps Howard News Service and Ohio University.

The government can do a lot more to give Americans the tools they need to hold it accountable and restore their trust.

The American Citizens' Accountability Tool Box

Our government can take three steps to improve the chances Americans will take action to hold their government accountable. First, government should set out clear goals and their plans to achieve them. Second, the government should be as candid about failure as it is about success. Third, the government, as a whole, as well as its agencies and programs, should report information in brief, user-friendly, searchable formats that a wide audience can understand. If Americans get clear information about agency and program plans and candid reports on the status of those plans, they can express their views on how well the agency or program is accomplishing the things they care about.

Clear goals and their plans to achieve them

Too often, government information is written in bureaucratese. Reports to the public should always be written in plain English. But agencies should also clearly report what they are trying to achieve and their plans, milestones, and who is accountable so all will know who is supposed to do what by when and for what purpose. Without these plans, how would anyone know when an agency or program fell short?

Today, such plans are available in many forms. Programs assessed with the Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) have improvement plans with milestones and dates posted on ExpectMore.gov. Agency websites have detailed plans to address areas of mismanagement highlighted on the Government Accountability Office's High-Risk list. But in their annual performance plans and reports, which are available on agency websites and ExpectMore.gov, agencies should briefly describe such plans and link to the more complete plans, should a reader wish to get more detail.

As candid about failure as it is about success

Just by reading most agency reports, one would think every goal was achieved and every problem was solved. With the kinds of challenges Federal agencies face, it's just not credible to think everything's going so well. Americans would have greater trust in a report that admitted failure just as often as it trumpets success. Jerry Ellig of the Mercatus Center, which judges annually the quality of agency performance reporting, wrote recently, "The first step in scoring well on [the center's annual performance report scored] is to actually acknowledge performance shortfalls and management challenges." Agencies should have faith in the public and in their stakeholders that they can handle the truth.

That's a tall order in Washington, where opponents and critics hammer the slightest failure. How to combat this? Agencies should consult early and often with the stakeholders in Congress and among the public on their plans and progress (or lack thereof) implementing them.

Once that consultation is ongoing, candid, and ultimately productive, the public will come to expect it. This candor and transparency won't cure Washington of partisan politics, but it will make critics who have been consulted think twice about holding that press conference to hammer a well meaning, hard working public servant.

Report information in brief, user friendly, searchable formats

The Department of Education's annual report is almost 200 pages long. Even if you really care about the performance of the Department, you are not likely to sit down and sift through that much information. Luckily, the Department published last year a much shorter "highlights document" that summarizes the agency's accomplishments. And other agencies continue to experiment with different reporting formats to find the most useful ones. Though the Mercatus Center cited the benefits of the highlights document in Ninth Annual performance Report Scorecard, it gave suggestions on how to improve it: "When done well, the highlights document is clearly a best practice that aids the public in understanding the agency's performance information."

Next year, to address some of the concerns raised by the Mercatus Center, each federal agency will be required to summarize its performance in two pages. All of the information traditionally reported will still be available, but a two page summary will show how the agency is performing in key areas. And technology will allow the reader to go from the summary to more detailed information on that specific topic.

ExpectMore.gov was designed to link to electronic copies of the copious evidence cited in Program Assessment Rating Tool assessments. Unfortunately, too few links to the underlying evidence are available. That should be fixed.

This kind of innovation – linking summary information to more detailed source data – is the way performance ought to be reported. Give summary information, but allow readers easy access to more detailed information if they want it.

The Future of Government Accountability

The next Administration won't publish less information. But it should aim to produce greater information in a more useful way. Imagine being able to track tax dollars received, how they are appropriated, who they went to, and, most importantly, what results Americans got for the investment. This would link data from the Department of Treasury about tax receipts with budget information, then link agency expenditures with evaluations of the activities they are funding. Track tax dollars like UPS packages. This information should be easy for citizens to get.

One good step to take would be to depict the geographic location of expenditures. Fedspending.org, the site on which usaspending.gov is modeled, already shows the distribution of contract and other award dollars by state and Congressional district. And www.geodata.gov provides a lot of geographic data in one location. What if the government gave you the same information, but also told you where the money you paid in taxes was going or, perhaps more importantly, what was being achieved with it? We could learn what was working best in education, health care, crime reduction, etc. and spread those proven practices throughout the country.

Government doesn't have all the answers to America's problems. It needs help finding those answers. One way to expand our knowledge is to invite the American people (or at least Congress and other stakeholders) to participate in the conversation about what works, what doesn't, and what's being done to improve. I've written above about some who are doing that (e.g. EPA, TSA, the Intelligence Community, and the Budget community). But technologies, such as those in use by Wikipedia or Intellipedia, can set the rules by which the public is invited to find the best solution to our biggest challenges. Perhaps we can open up the conversation about performance data, program performance, attaining goals, and results to anyone who cares to comment? The more contributing – through collaborative technology, on-line chats, or some other tool – the more likely we are to get the best ideas.

There are many good initiatives already underway to improve Americans' access to information. Some agencies are already harnessing collaborative technology to get better results. These and other initiatives must join to improve the ability of Americans to access and use the information that's already available to them.

Caution: Ensure Privacy, Security, and Accuracy

One of the pitfalls of greater government transparency is diminished information security and the unintended release of private information about Americans. Too often, agencies release social security numbers or other private information about Americans getting some service or benefit from the government. Likewise, government systems are frequently hacked, leaving such information vulnerable to release. Though it is difficult to image a failsafe system for protecting against such unintended release, agencies of the government should ensure adequate controls are in place to protect against the unintended release of information that should not be made public.

Though not quite as serious a concern, the quality or accuracy of government data should be enhanced. With so many people entering so much data, controls should also be in place to assure Americans that the data they access is accurate and reliable.

What is the measure of success for government transparency?

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Article I, Section 9 of the United States Constitution requires that “a regular Statement and Account of the Receipts and Expenditures of all public Money shall be published from time to time.” Technology allows us to meet this obligation better than ever before. But our purpose should be higher. Transparency should enable the American people to eliminate wrongdoing and improve performance. We can harness technology to publish the information available today in a more useful way. In so doing, we can give Americans the tools they need to root out those who abuse the public trust and hold them accountable. We can also get smarter about what programs work best, so we can solve problems faster and cheaper.

If we can demonstrate information is being used to rid the government of corruption and improve programs, we will increase trust in government. Shouldn't that be our measure of success?