On-line Engagement – New Models and Implications for Government Departments and Officials

A roundtable by the Canadian Policy Research Networks
Final report – Elisabeth Richard, Director Corporate and Public Affairs
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Preface

On October 28, 1999, the Canadian Policy Research Networks and Public Works and Government Services Canada (PWGSC) jointly hosted the roundtable on New Models for On-line Engagement. Chaired by Arthur Kroeger, former Deputy Minister and Chair of the Board of the Canadian Policy Research Networks, the roundtable brought together a cross-section of federal public servants to share ideas and discuss the need for a common framework regarding the impact of using the Internet to foster two-way communications with citizens. By examining implications for government departments and officials, the roundtable helped to identify the government mechanisms needed to facilitate a larger participation of citizens through online technology.

Participants represented a wide array of functions: line departments and central agencies, IM/IT and policy, communications, consultations, program development and operations. Some brought practical experiences, others had thought through the conceptual issues. While they came from sometimes very different work environments, many experienced a similar challenge. The familiar landmarks that once clearly defined their functions seem either to converge with others, or to fragment into many new roles. The roundtable was an opportunity to take stock of these changes and propose actions to help them in this transition.

A background document, "Tools of Governance"[1] by Elisabeth Richard, Director, Corporate and Public Affairs, was circulated in advance to participants of the roundtable. It included an overview of issues raised through attempts to utilize Information and Communication Technologies in pursuit of better governance and suggested elements of a framework to adapt traditional hierarchical public service structures.

At the outset there was a general discussion on how the Internet reshapes government processes, particularly the functions of communications, policy development, information technology and information management, and consultation. More in-depth discussions explored in what ways government processes could be adjusted to permit government and citizens to interact via on-line systems.

This report reflects the broad direction and spirit of the discussion at the roundtable, both in plenary and in small groups, but is not intended to reflect the views of individual participants. It summarizes the key themes discussed during the plenary discussion and the more detailed

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1 This paper is included as a chapter in "Digital Democracy: Discourse and Decision-Making in the Information Age," by Barry Hague and Brian D. Loader (Routledge, 1998). It creates a framework to help governments adjust their roles and processes in the Internet environment. It follows-up on issues outlined in the G7 Governments On Line and Democracy White Paper (see: *http://www.state.mn.us/gol/democracy/final/canada.htm*).

conclusions of the small group discussions. The report is structured as follows: 1) an introduction; 2) notes from the morning plenary session, which review the main issues and how they affect systems and processes in place; 3) a description of the discussions recorded in the three breakaway groups that were held in the afternoon to look in detail into the mechanisms of mass-listening, the quality and quantity of relationships and the organizational changes generated by on-line engagement of citizens; and 4) key learnings from the discussions are summarized, and a list of next steps suggested, which include defining the new framework that departments now face, as well as the mechanisms of this framework (sharing experiences and redefining the functions affected).

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Introduction

The Chair of the roundtable, Arthur Kroeger, opened the discussion by characterizing the day's task as "trying to come to grips with the future."

It is clear from past experience with mass communications that when people receive information, they react to it, and they then want to express their views. The Internet is providing a new and effective means of doing so. In the process, it is raising some important new issues for traditional systems of government. A "participatory democracy" is a term that has been current for over 30 years, but, in fact, only limited progress has been made in giving it practical expression. Some important changes have been made in the Public Service to make it more responsive to the public. On the other hand, there has been very little evolution in our traditional systems of representative government. This constitutes an important constraint on officials who are trying to deal with the contemporary realities of the Internet. There is, however, no alternative but to press ahead with the search for new ways of coping. This roundtable represented an opportunity for officials to compare notes and draw conclusions from their experiences.

Plenary Discussion

The questions for the plenary (see Box 1) were designed to bring to the surface the point of view of the various functions represented, but the participants often addressed all of them in the same intervention. The same series of impacts – on agenda setting and partnerships, on marketing challenges and opportunities, on the organization – were raised repeatedly, no matter which function of government participants came from.

The discussion started around the key issues of convergence, relationships, volume and trust. The plenary discussion then explored the impact of these issues on key mechanisms: e-mail and interface with the public, consultation, integrated services and the role of elected officials.

Convergence

Since the Internet combines many of the traditional tools of information gathering and information dissemination, it creates a convergence that affects traditional processes. The discussion showed that the convergence of many media into one tool made correspondence officers face policy development issues, policy officials face marketing issues, communication officers wonder whether online communications created conflicts with the parliamentary process, representatives of the IM/IT community wonder about community building and outreach and how to connect correspondence from citizens to the policy development process. Despite this sense of fragmentation, this blurring of familiar landmarks, a feeling of cohesion rose around the table from the desire of participants to share experiences in new frontiers.

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Box 1:
Roundtable discussion: Questions for discussion

According to your experience, how does the Internet reshape government processes to increase interaction with citizens? What is the impact on your organization? What are the effects on public service models and functions?

Depending on the functions, following are some specific questions to consider:

Communications: Does this type of governance reduce the need to market policy decisions? Is the Internet a direct channel to the citizen, by-passing the press? What is needed to make it effective? Can government use it to create coalitions, like stakeholders do?

Policy development/agenda setting and decision making: How is the information gathered through the Internet useful in these processes? How are decision makers involved in this constant pulse-taking? How can they be accountable?

Consultation: Is the concept of partnership a valid model with a wide range of self-declared stakeholders? In an environment where mass-talk is the key, can the Internet provide tools for mass-listening?

Corporate services/organizational impact: How do our hierarchical public service structures fit in this environment of connections that are no longer vertical, but increasingly lateral and diagonal? Do competencies exist? Are responsibilities clear? More inter-departmental coordination? Can we apply to government the principles of collaborative design in the private sector?

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Relationships

Participants saw the Internet as playing a key role in strengthening relationships. The Internet was described as an environment of narrowcasting, ideal for engaging stakeholders. On top of that, since it is a mode of communication that allows many-to-many communications, it is a unique environment to facilitate the relationships between stakeholders themselves. In this environment for multi-stakeholder relationships, government's role as a broker becomes more important. In some cases, for example, an Internet dialogue gets "people communicating with people," sharing their experiences. This is particularly true in communities where stakeholders are far apart geographically, like the rural communities. This model of people talking to each other is key to the process of multi-stakeholder negotiation.

Volume

The quantity of stakeholders was an issue. There were discussions about the number of stakeholders that could be integrated into a decision-making process. Since the Internet allows stakeholders to self-declare, the question presented was whether the concept of partnership was a valid model with a wide range of self-declared stakeholders. However, nobody at the table reported concrete examples of an avalanche of self-declared stakeholders. On the contrary, some participants reported problems expanding the participation, and reaching out to Canadians. The challenge at this point seems more to widen the range than to deal with numbers. Marketing was a big issue. Concerns about reaching beyond the predictable groups, to new communities, were raised: the need to balance the views of the typical Internet surfer with a larger sample of citizens. The potential of the net to rally, to create quick coalitions through, for example, electronic postcard campaigns was cited, but there was a lack of practical experience. Some topics – residential schools, for example – create more excitement in the public than more generic topics.

Trust

Some participants questioned whether trust building was not the major issue: quality rather than quantity of relationships. A participant referred to the dangers of "the numbers game," which could be misleading and does not translate into engagement. For another participant, an essential key to building trust is to send the message that people are truly influencing the process. The question remains as to how to achieve this on-line public input into policy decision making. Like traditional means of public involvement, it requires feedback on how people's input will be used, and then the rationale for the eventual decision taken.

E-mail and interface with the public

Governments are now well endowed with e-mail systems. Yet protocols to interface with citizens are missing. Many problems still impede the use of electronic correspondence and other electronic feedback for public inquiries and the gathering of public opinion. Whether inquiries are raised in face-to-face dialogue sessions or in e-mail, response time is an issue. The response process was described as going through many levels of approval, let alone translation. One dialogue sponsored by a government agency produced occasional questions regarding a policy issue. However, by the time the response came through the regular decision-making channels, the discussion had moved to another topic. Some on-line dialogues were kept very low-key because the capacity to respond quickly enough was not there. Later during a breakout session, a participant suggested that for consultation on broad policies, a team of specialists should be identified to provide responses.

A broader question in this new direct interface with the public would be who is a legitimate contact between the citizen and government: the minister, members of Parliament or public servants? Or all three?

Some examples of service standards guaranteeing a 24-to-48-hour response time were given. With the processes presently in place, however, these standards create a lot of stress in the organization. The need to give front-line workers the ability to respond was identified. However, in some cases, a participant wondered to what extent they would be influencing policy development by the content of their responses. One participant argued that revisiting the format might be one way to be able to provide a speedy response. While formal correspondence implies a lot of time, a two-line e-mail does not.

Consultation

Going beyond e-mail to a wider conversation with citizens raises other issues: volume, authenticity, and tools for mass participation.

Volume

Even though a lack of participation was frequently reported for many consultations, on-line engagement enhances the opportunity for volume. Some questioned whether "mass participation" is what government wants to encourage. Another participant tried to define a mental image of what mass participation would be: if the Internet does indeed create a mass channel to government, it does not necessarily mean everybody should be heard at the same time. The Internet provides an environment of narrowcasting, which allows for building relationships with small, targeted audiences. Rather than aiming for mass participation, should we not be concentrating energies in facilitating a dialogue between specific audiences, with selected objectives? Many participants suggested this is one of the functions of the Internet that works best.

Authenticity

Authenticity and legitimacy were a major concern: is the public service role in defending public interest not bigger than quick comments on chat lines? The authenticity of these exchanges is even questionable: given some private companies are reported to pay students to go on chat groups to promote products, what would stop lobbyists to do the same?

Mass participation

Yet according to some participants, mass participation should not be discarded, since some of the mass tools to empower citizens are starting to mature. The Canada Gazette is an important example. Whereas the printed version was generally used by lobby groups and well-resourced

organizations, the on-line version, which has a powerful search engine, is more easily accessible and has already been used to mobilize citizens. The example of the Nunavut territory time zones was described: a project to create a single time zone for Nunavut was brought to light, exposed to the media and publicly debated in a very short time, using information gathered in the Canada Gazette on-line.

Another example is the comment@canada.gc.ca created to receive comments on the Canada Site as a catch-all for Canadians, compared to pm@pm.gc.ca, the Prime Minister's e-mail. Connecting these e-mails to officials, elected or public servants, who have a responsibility in the subject matter raised in the e-mail is a key, unresolved, issue. One participant indicated that there is a need to ensure that Members of Parliament and the policy shops are kept informed and become part of the process. One breakout group later suggested the Canada Site should have a facility that allows citizens to give their opinions in a structured way.

Integrated services

An integrated common service infrastructure was described as an issue in many different ways. One participant referred to a consultation whereby computer firewalls between departments stopped them from using a common database. The same firewalls did not exist between the department and the general public. In other cases, the question was how to present a common face while involving many departments on a public issue. For example, environmental issues touch the mandates of several departments. In light of the transparency and access that the Internet provides, how does the government bring coherence or consistency to its position in initiating consultations on environmental issues? This has implications for how the government communicates to and with citizens and also how departments communicate with each other on public policy issues. Managing issues horizontally and collectively faces cultural and organizational barriers: the accountability mechanisms are vertical, not horizontal. This is a key challenge, whether in policy development or in citizen engagement. The on-line environment makes this even more troublesome.

The Information Technology community reported they lacked key intelligence to build an infrastructure that satisfied the needs of the citizens. There is a wide variety of mechanisms that can be used. It would be useful to conduct a consultation about consultation, to find out from citizens what they need in order to be true partners. For example, some very sophisticated tools might not be suitable for all stakeholders. The very question that should be addressed is: Between technology or citizen engagement, which is the driver?

Other concerns included: security, demands for a 24-hours-a-day, 7-days-a-week service.

Role of elected officials

A key undefined element of the citizen engagement agenda also leads to relationships with parliamentarians. Some participants were concerned that by giving citizens a mass channel to

government, they may be subverting the parliamentary process. Some participants reported cases where on-line dialogues were used to detect issues early in the decision-making process, even before discussion papers are presented to stakeholders. The role played by Members of Parliament who are conveyors of public opinion from their ridings was highlighted in comparison, yet the two processes are not connected.

Evidence that some MPs want to be connected to the process of on-line engagement was reported. Some MPs describe themselves as front-line information officers and want to know how to use on-line mechanisms, starting with the wealth of on-line government information. As mentioned earlier, keeping elected representatives and/or government departments involved in the responses and concerns received through the Canada Site and the Prime Minister's mail was an issue. Yet empowerment of front-line officers to reduce the load of ministerial correspondence and ensure quick service, as mentioned above, was also deemed important. The definition of mechanisms that can connect both needs would be useful.

Small group discussions

The small groups explored which established processes inside governments should be adjusted to permit government and citizens to interact via on-line systems. Guidelines for the on-line information gathering tools, currently used informally, were suggested. Roles of public servants and elected officials and the wide range of stakeholders in a new governance structure were explored. The impact of this structure on the process of agenda setting and decision making were examined.

The mechanisms of mass-listening

The first group examined the informal listening – or information gathering – tools provided by the Internet (see Box 2). Newsgroup monitoring, ad hoc surveys on issues and e-mails were defined as useful to the public service, in principle. Participants questioned whether they were used effectively.

Box 2
Small group #1: The mechanisms of mass-listening

In what ways should established processes inside governments be adjusted to permit government and citizens to interact via on-line systems?

Are the informal listening tools (newsgroup monitoring, ad hoc surveys on issues) provided by the Internet useful to the public service? How do they compare to traditional listening tools?

Among the formal tools, are the mechanisms of on-line consultation clear? What are the resource implications? What are the respective roles of public servants and elected officials? Can the consultation lead to documented results? Does on-line consultation make them harder to achieve because of raised expectations?

Does the Government of Canada IM/IT infrastructure support these mechanisms? What is needed to support departments and increase mass-listening?

E-mails

Some citizens prefer to write to the "Government of Canada" through the Canada Site rather than expressing their views to individual Cabinet members or departments. Citizens prefer to relate to a pan-governmental structure and the Internet creates the opportunity to analyze this feedback from a pan-governmental perspective. Yet there is no current pan-governmental effort or facility to manage such a process. The mechanisms need to be defined to share this information so that it may be useful to the respective departments and the Government of Canada as a whole. There is also an added pressure to create consistent response procedures across government. These mechanisms include integration with the information used by the Cabinet Committee on Communications, for example. In general, we still need to define how the mechanisms can be integrated in the agenda-setting and decision-making process.

There was an effort to distinguish between information requests (reference and referrals and Access to Information requests) and consultations. Perhaps in the broader scope of on-line engagement one might include reference and referrals and ATI requests, but they can also be considered on-line service delivery. Some of the e-mails that come through the Canada site and ministers' e-mails are just service requests – they are not about people commenting or providing their opinion on issues, and they do not have any direct relevance to the decision-making process. Yet they may influence how a web site is designed, which content will receive the most emphasis and, therefore, what information citizens will base their opinions on.

Newsgroup monitoring

Lurking on listservs was considered useful to follow the concerns of specific stakeholders. But the limits of this method were identified:

- if issues are to be detected through newsgroup monitoring, we need to analyze their content, not only tally the numbers. Yet the tools for content analysis are lacking.

- there is a reluctance to "listen in" even though many department's policy issues are discussed on newsgroups. A proposal to "mine" newsgroups has been discarded because it was considered an invasion of privacy. The trends in Access to Information are also a concern, since e-mails now tend to be included in the range of documents that fall within its purview.

- even though they are starting to be used as a listening tool, however informal, the newsgroups monitored are not used as a dialogue tool. There is a reluctance to respond to these comments because it is not clear in what capacity a public servant would be responding: as a citizen, as the representative of the department, the minister?

Knowledge management

Finally, an efficient use of knowledge automatically generated by software was identified as a key, often overlooked mechanism. Query reports and search engine results lead to development of a web site to better respond to client needs. The experience with rural citizens was cited as an example. Notes based on public inquiries were used to create pathfinders on various subjects. Later in the discussion, the lack of information management standards that enable sharing and easy access to information across departments came up again.

Capacity building

The group paused to reflect on the reasons why these listening tools were not more widespread. The lack of awareness was raised, but more so the lack of capacity. The lack of a framework has impeded until now the development of mass-listening tools, their mechanisms are not clear enough. The dissemination of case studies would be useful. It was also suggested that the knowledge developed and recorded in this roundtable should be made available to international working groups like the study currently underway by the OECD. Capacity, more than resources, was identified as an obstacle: that is, the lack of awareness of what can be done, the lack of know-how, the inability to handle a huge influx of public opinion, the lack of guidelines, etc. In the end, this all leads to resources – for training, for people to prepare guidelines, for sharing of best practices, etc. But more than resources, what is important is a change in culture where the on-line consultation community is more connected, shares information and best practices.

Mechanisms of on-line discussions

The mechanisms were examined: how to stimulate discussion as well as how to limit the response. It was suggested that a third party might be best placed to gather and analyze comments.

The group spent some time reflecting on how the new mechanisms of on-line mass-listening compare to the traditional tools like face-to-face consultations. Participants thought that in on-

line consultations, the traditional roles tended to be blurred. Public servants are more tempted to participate as citizens in an on-line discussion where formalities are limited and spontaneity is valued.

Diversity was cited as an advantage: diverse groups that would not normally get their voices heard in face-to-face processes can be reached. However, it is not a very diverse group out there on the net at the moment. Further attention should be given to fostering more diversity on-line. There is a gap between the potential of the technology and what we are actually able to do. The challenge might even increase as polarization of society and the digital divide becomes greater.

Roles of public servants

The respective roles of public servants and elected officials were explored. Participants were not sure where to draw the line, since the on-line mechanisms both inform and debate. It is the role of elected officials – cabinet ministers who have responsibility in terms of policy development, and members of Parliament – to debate. The role of public servants is to inform.

Public servants have seen their role evolving, however, as they are becoming facilitators of cultural change, for example, by getting citizens on-line, and nurturing on-line communities. A participant from the policy function suggested there was a need to build capacity among policy analysts. Again, it was suggested that partners and third parties might be best placed to manage on-line debates.

Follow-up

Participants recapped the needs of departments to support and increase mass-listening:

1. Support development of government-wide interactive tools.
2. Support horizontal integration of information, through information management strategies, to match the work done in horizontal policy development.
3. Build a reference and referral system to support consultation. A large part of consultation is educating the public on specific issues so they can give informed opinion. Supporting consultation through easily accessible, well-organized on-line information resources is important.
3. Increase the technical capacity as well as training, information sharing, best practices, guidelines.

The quality and quantity of relationships

The second group examined the principles of partnership with a wide range of self-declared stakeholders and the conditions of this type of governance (see Box 3).

Box 3
Small group #2: The quality and quantity of relationships

How can the public service partner with a wide range of self-declared stakeholders? How can the Government of Canada connect with local on-line communities? How does on-line consultation include all citizens?

Does this type of governance allow buy-in from the citizens? What are the conditions needed to get buy-in from the citizens? Are there on-line mechanisms that help pull the audience?

Do these wide range of relationships have the potential to facilitate the marketing of policy decisions when needed? How?

Does the Government of Canada IM/IT infrastructure support these mechanisms? What is needed to support departments? To foster interdepartmental efforts?

The group started by examining the role of the Internet as a consultation tool, recognizing that while public consultation has evolved over the last 100 years, the Internet as a consultation tool is only four years old. Participants were not sure that governments were ready to broaden their process. If governments are indeed moving toward a more open process, an examination of the impact for politicians and public servants should be conducted as well as scenario planning.

Examples

The National Productivity Forum conducted by U.S. Vice-President Al Gore in 1997 was cited. It required very sophisticated information management tools, but the interface with participants was simple: a prompt helped participants to categorize their thoughts. The process was also carefully managed.

Remarking that "there is policy and then there is policy," one participant noted the wide range of policy consultation and development tools. Some forums are open by nature while others might restrict participation. The Internet will not replace Parliament: what we are moving toward is simply opening the process.

Key mechanisms

There was a consensus that the tools are coming on-line , computer literacy is growing, and that there is a political will to engage. Participants looked at what needs to be done to encourage this process in consultation practices:

1. Citizens need feedback. They need to know that they are getting influence for the efforts that they put in.
2. Diversity: participants thought that citizens like to be in a multilevel discussion .

3. Sincerity: realistic expectations about the decision-making process have to be disclosed clearly. Some structures are not conducive to this at all. Above all citizens want openness about the decision, players and process.

Impact on public servants

From the public service perspective, this stretches the public environment analysis over a much longer time frame of policy development. It is an iterative process: quick immediate inputs can be gathered at various stages. It was not clear how to relate this input to other information gathering tools like public opinion polls. This poses management problems: what is the process to respond to many iterations? It was also necessary to identify the objective of the consultation and where it was situated in the decision-making process.

Since the role of government is evolving towards a role of facilitation, concerns were raised about whether departments are giving the appropriate support to the stakeholders. Government should improve the capacity of stakeholders to relate to their own networks. However, one participant suggested that in the case of youth, this approach might not be efficient, since youth is known not to deal with associations. When asked, Canadians vary in whether voluntary organizations speak for them in government consultations. Thus government needs to be sensitive that some citizens wish to speak directly on issues (i.e., through the Internet), while others depend on voluntary organizations to represent them. Such community groups and associations often need resources and assistance to consult their members and to do the required research.

Follow-up

In reviewing what departments needed to support a new partnership approach, participants identified the following:

1. "One size does not fit all": there is a wide range of on-line mechanisms that need to be better defined. Specific mechanisms that need to be explored include: How is input to be analyzed? How do we guarantee fairness and ensure the agenda is not hijacked? A registry of consultation best practices is important.
2. One participant described the challenge for public servants as being "vertically accountable, horizontally challenged": there is a need for help from the top to clarify objectives.
3. An Internet strategy recommended by Canadians themselves. The question should be posed: How do you, Canadians, want the federal government to use the Internet to facilitate citizen engagement?

Organizational changes

This group looked at the organizational changes generated by the use of on-line mechanisms to foster two-way communication (see Box 4).

Strategic forums

One participant described an initiative aimed at bringing the IT function closer to the social agenda: a strategic forum was created at the senior management level to explore how technology can support the department's social and community-building agenda. This had created an extra workload, since this task was on top of the other jobs to be done. Strategic forums are also needed across departments. On-line technology brings a unique opportunity to implement a "no wrong door" policy, but this will be impossible without appropriate coordination within and across departments.

Identity crisis

The term identity crisis was also used to describe the United Kingdom's experience: a reference was made to the United Kingdom having published for the first time the names of public servants involved in a consultation. This was felt as having a profound impact on the public service since government, in order to increase accountability of the public service, encourages the public to contact bureaucrats instead of their members of Parliament.

Organizational culture

Public service organizational culture is an issue: for example, buy-in from program managers, communication and policy shops, and the minister's office within a department is needed and new alliances between the groups have to be created. Also, the electronic infrastructure needs to be coordinated, and to do so, strong leadership and long-term planning are necessary. With Y2K behind us, there is hope that the energy of IT managers can be now directed to this issue.

The group examined whether there were new jobs emerging from this organizational change, and whether a learning plan, or a plan to acquire the proper skills, was needed. One participant suggested that the preferred modes of services should be identified, at least. There did not seem

to be a concerted effort at matching skills to future demand. One participant thought that there is a need to over-classify, if anything, in order to invest in the best skills in the front lines.

Follow-up

The group finished by recommending that:

- The Technology and Information Management Secretariat of the Treasury Board act as a champion and that each department identify an internal champion for on-line engagement.
- The common IM/IT infrastructure of government provides support to ensure universality of access as well as alleviate the security challenges.

Overview of the roundtable outcomes

The results of the day can be summarized in two clusters: first the key learnings from this first opportunity to discuss challenges presented by on-line engagement with players from across the federal system: and second, next steps in the ongoing effort to take advantage of this new tool of governance.

Key learnings

The key learnings can be divided into three general themes:

1. **The fear of dealing with volume**

   - A mass channel to government does not necessarily mean everybody is being heard at the same time. This environment of narrowcasting enables governments to build relationships with small, targeted audiences.
   - In reality low, volumes are often experienced on consultation processes despite the desire to reach out to more stakeholders. On-line marketing techniques are needed.

2. **Relationships with elected officials**

   - Keeping elected representatives and/or government departments involved in the responses and concerns received through the Canada Site and the Prime Minister's mail is a concern.
   - Empowerment of front-line officers to enable quick responses might be necessary.
   - Many MPs consider themselves as front-line information officers and want to know how to use the government information infrastructure.
   - Public servants are concerned about subverting the parliamentary process with Internet consultations.

3. **Capacity building**

- The pockets of innovation reported and the awareness around the table were striking. But a feeling of working in isolation is often prevalent. Despite a sense of fragmentation from roundtable participants, the desire to share experiences in new frontiers created a feeling of cohesion.
- There is a steep learning curve ahead even for seasoned practitioners. They need direction and support in continuing the work of this roundtable: defining the new framework, sharing experiences and redefining the functions affected.

Next Steps

The next steps fall into two categories:

1. **Mechanisms of on-line public opinion research and consultation**

- Study the use and management of on-line public opinion research.
- Consultation on consultation: an Internet strategy recommended by Canadians themselves. The question should be posed: How do you, Canadians, want the federal government to use the Internet to facilitate citizen engagement?
- Support development of government-wide interactive tools. From PWGSC's perspective, the need to consider development of a global Internet gateway for consultation and the public's general comments through the Canada Site.
- Define the wide range of on-line mechanisms.
- Increase the technical capacity, as well as training, particularly of middle managers, fostering cross-skilling, information sharing, best practices.

2. **Integration of infrastructure**

- Support horizontal integration of information, through information management strategies, to match the work done in horizontal policy development.
- Build a reference and referral system to support consultation. A large part of consultation is educating the public on specific issues so they can give informed opinion. Supporting consultation through easily accessible, well-organized on-line information resources is important. The Technology and Information Management Secretariat of the Treasury Board act as a champion and that each department identify an internal champion for on-line engagement.
- Clarify at the top and address the concerns of those "vertically accountable, horizontally challenged."
- Explore how to integrate elected officials – ministers and members of Parliament – in the processes.

Conclusion

As federal departments are pressured to increase their relationships with stakeholders through the use of Information and Communications Technologies, they face new definitions of roles, processes and structures. The emergence of the citizen as a participant in the governance process requires the creation of adequate response within government. New strategic partnerships are needed both within and across departments.

The work is not easy: the IT people must be able to interpret how programs relate to citizens and program officers must be able to understand how technology has, and can, change how they connect with citizens. Moreover, both government IT and government programs need to have an integrated approach to understanding what information citizens need and how they want to receive it, and how they want to interact with their governments. They must imagine the re-engineering of their processes. Line departments must take the time to document their experiences and share them across the board. Central agencies, pipeline builders must support this work, facilitate, anticipate the needs. The familiar landmarks are absent in this exploration. The roundtable has allowed a sharing of a vision of this horizon and the identification of new landmarks. It has helped recognize avenues where we can land to build a concrete capacity using the many, albeit small and isolated, experiences already in place in the Canadian public service – and create new partnerships within our organization: our own internal civil society.

In his concluding comments, the Chair emphasized the scale and rapidity of the changes in the environment within which public servants must work. There can be no doubt of the impact that forces such as the Internet are having; the Public Service has changed more in the 7 years since he left than it had during the preceding 34 years of his service. The day's discussion demonstrated that the efforts to deal with the impact of the Internet were very much a work in progress; a good deal of headway has been made in dealing with some issues, but new ones are continually arising. It is important to continue the dialogue and the search for best practices. The Chair also suggested that it is important to encourage elected representatives to focus on the changes that are taking place around them. In particular, the rapid spread of e-mail raised questions about the respective roles of officials and members of Parliament in communicating with the public. It might, therefore, be worthwhile to consider holding a follow-up session, which would be predominantly attended by MPs but with some officials present as resource people.

Roundtable on New Models for On-line Engagement:
Implications for Government Departments and Officials

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