



Report on the workshop on a new
citizen-centric information system

May 6, 2011, Ottawa

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For Human Resources and Skills Development Canada

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Overview

On May 6, 2011, the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) convened a workshop entitled, “Towards a New Citizen-Centric Information System.” Sponsored by Human Resources and Skills Development, the workshop brought together experts from the public, para-public and private sectors to explore how the department’s social data system can be improved to reflect changing Canadian realities and needs and provide better support to individual Canadians, business and institutions. Areas of particular interest were identified as information services for persons with disabilities and data pertaining to learning and labour market information.

The workshop began with presentations by David Eaves, a self-described “public policy entrepreneur, open government activist and negotiation expert,” and David Hume, Executive Director of Citizen Engagement, British Columbia Ministry of Citizens’ Services. In the afternoon, the workshop moved to plenary discussions on specific topics, each led off by a brief set of prepared comments by subject matter experts in attendance.

The workshop was designed to address a series of important issues with developing a new citizen-centric information system. First off, workshop attendees learned about what are the key characteristics of such a system, and how it can be differentiated from prevailing e-government approaches. They also learned about best practices from Canada and abroad, from other governments as well as from the private sector. The afternoon discussions focused on learning more about the opportunities and challenges of implementing such a system as well as the steps needed to put such a system in place.

This report provides a general summary of the workshop presentations and ensuing discussion. After a brief summary of the two keynote presentations, it provides a structured review of the workshop discussions according to the key questions outlined above.

Keynote presentations

David Eaves, consultant

David Eaves spoke about how data and information is a strategic asset, and that government can do better to recognize its value and leverage it to improve its service delivery and provide better value to citizens. Eaves pointed out that governments are in a unique position; while private companies such as Wal-Mart generate data that is proprietary and only available to a select few employees, government data is a public asset that can be shared and analyzed by anyone, making it a much more powerful. When government opens up its data, it can take advantage of the niche knowledge that individuals and organizations may have to use it more effectively, spurring innovation of new products and services that it would not otherwise have the resources or initiative to develop on its own.

Eaves argued that the release of public data can enhance every area of citizens' lives, improving their access to information on their communities, to career choices, to investment opportunities. This information increases citizen engagement and encourages better policy development. Eaves believes that it is public servants who will benefit the most from open data policies, giving them access to more data can increase the amount and quality of analysis they can do, leading to greater efficiencies and more policy innovation. He pointed out that in other government jurisdictions that have opened up their data, such as the city of Washington DC, it is public servants who download the data the most, suggesting that the information is meeting an appetite for more information first and foremost in the civil service.

David Hume, Citizen Engagement, British Columbia Ministry of Citizens' Services

David Hume spoke to his government's initiative to become more "citizen-centred" in its service delivery mechanisms. This approach is about creating a more holistic experience for citizens in the way that they access government services and programs, giving citizens easy, timely access to public services when and how they choose. This approach requires different government ministries to work together and has required the government to develop a "bigger picture" around its information systems, developing a more strategic perspective to its investments in service delivery. As noted in the BC Government's report, "Citizens @ the Centre: B.C. Government 2.0": "the shift envisioned in this plan will see the BC Public Service move from an online service presence defined by organizational structure to a more citizen and user-centric model." By using technology to deliver services when and where citizens want, the BC government believes it will save citizens and business time and money, allow the government to allocate its resources more effectively, and foster greater satisfaction and trust in government among citizens.

Key discussion items

What are the key characteristics of an effective citizen-centric approach?

The Internet has shifted media from mass, uni-directional communication, to personalized, bi-directional communication. As a result, people are now used to information being delivered in a variety of different formats (small messages in real-time, blog articles, press releases, etc), in a personalized way, and very often with an opportunity to engage and respond with feedback. As we have seen happening in the Middle East, social media tools such as Twitter and Facebook are being used by citizens all over the world to create social change. Not only does this show that people are able to quickly appropriate new tools, in innovative, unexpected ways, but it creates expectations for how people relate to each other, to business, and to government service providers.

New technologies are enabling governments to develop easier and more intuitive tools for helping citizens find and access the services they need. As noted in the BC government's report, "citizens do not necessarily care what agency within government delivers a program or service. They just want effective access and quality service." Therefore, an effective citizen-centric approach would be designed around citizens' needs, rather than the organizational structure of government departments.

To this end, David Hume noted that the first step in his government's citizen-centric approach is to redesign the main "doorway" to government services, www.gov.bc.ca, in order to simplify the service experience for citizens. For government websites, this shift has implied a shift in emphasis away from messaging to service delivery. Hume noted that good examples of other governments pursuing this approach include the state of Utah (www.utah.gov), the state of California (www.ca.gov) and the UK government website (www.direct.gov.uk).

Newfoundland established its own citizen-centric information system, the Community Accounts (www.communityaccounts.ca), nearly 15 years ago as a way to provide a comprehensive public resource of community, regional, and provincial data. Alton Hollett of the province's Statistics Agency provided an overview of how his department developed the program around a conceptual framework of wellbeing. Hollett noted that this model has been one of the main contributors to the success of the Community Accounts, as they have found that data is more highly valued by citizens if it relates to their lives, allowing citizens to "see themselves in the data."

It is becoming increasingly clear that effective citizen-centric approaches need to reflect the myriad ways in which citizens access government information. Currently, the government continues to be delivering much of the information it has directly to citizens through its website and other information products. David Eaves argued that government needs to shift away from its self-perception as a service provider to that of data provider, serving as a platform for innovation where others use the information it provides to create the tools and services that are of benefit to citizens. As he wrote in the background paper for the workshop:

"This transition is not new, merely accelerated. Government ministries fund and build core infrastructure, be it physical like a bridge, or legal, like a code of laws that serve as

platforms upon which businesses and communities can innovate, live and thrive. Data as platform is the extension of this concept across the dimension of information.”

This transition implies that government data will become better integrated into the workflow of consumers and businesses. Eaves gave the example of how consumer product information could be provided at the point of sale, enabling customers to see immediately if there have been any warnings or recalls issued for products they are purchasing. While this process may be of some concern to public officials who fear a loss of control over the integrity and usage of data, he argued that service providers have every incentive to be using government data appropriately to reinforce the quality and credibility of their own products.

What are the best practices/lessons learned in shifting from a government-centric approach towards a citizen-centric approach

Alton Hollett related that in his government’s experience with the Community Accounts, the act of sharing data promotes transparency and increases confidence in government. They have also found that providing a comprehensive dataset of consistent quality supports evidence-based policy making, where quantitative analysis becomes a key ingredient in the policy making process. Since anyone can access the data, politicians, bureaucrats and community leaders have the same facts at their fingertips, enabling a much more informed debate. In fact, the inclusion of data from the Community Accounts has become a benchmark for new policy proposals.

The Community Accounts system is an example of how a system needs to be simple, straightforward, intuitive, and easy to understand if it is to be of greatest use. Hollett noted that his department struggled to prevent the Community Accounts system from getting too complex. Instead of doing a lot of sophisticated analysis themselves, they continue to believe it is more effective to allow users to do the work themselves based on the types of questions they want to answer. This type of system promoted greater transparency in the tools that they provide in the Community Accounts, since they are easy to understand and easy to replicate.

Hollett argued that one important element in the success of the Community Accounts was that a considerable investment was made in training users of the data, from bureaucrats to community members. The department regularly sends trainers across the province to meet with users and train them in using the data. This training increased the base of users around the province promoting its use and sustainability.

A number of open data advocates argued that any government initiatives should be focused on data, not on applications. Government-led initiatives can tend to crowd out innovation by centralizing strategies too much. Beyond providing official portals for viewing and downloading data, the experts emphasized that government should focus on developing a platform for citizens, researchers, entrepreneurs and public servants to access and build on the streams of information that is created as a by-product of offering services to the public.

To do this, the government needs to understand and follow open standards and technologies. The current paradigm of relying on proprietary formats and technologies has led to a system of vendor lock-in with increased development/maintenance costs, as well as creating a barrier to innovation and

sharing of information. Adopting open standards will enable the government to leverage the expertise in the community to create new services and products, often at very low cost or no cost to the government. A system that is built on open standards and open technologies will also be more sustainable and likely to withstand inevitable technological transitions in the future, since many stakeholders have an incentive to improve and update the system so it can evolve over time.

What are the key challenges and opportunities?

Workshop participants such as David Hume and Mark Faul reported that one of the most important challenges to implementing a new citizen-centric approach is to transform the government business model so that information is not being delivered in old ways. Traditional IT investments have focused on potential cost savings; the new citizen-centric framework requires a new governance framework which emphasizes a more holistic approach to service delivery, requiring greater amounts of cross-departmental collaboration and a much bigger emphasis on citizen satisfaction from using government services. As the BC government notes:

Overall, the goal is to not just apply technology to existing practices and processes. Rather it is to re-evaluate those existing practices and determine whether or not they are still valid and, if so, how they can be improved. Technology is wasted if it is only applied to speed up work that shouldn't be done in the first place. That is why this strategy is about transformation as much as it is about technology, because it must challenge the public service to rethink not just how it works but also the nature of that work itself.

Alton Hollett cautioned that developing initiatives such as the Community Accounts requires a long-term time commitment. Given the timeframes and unique success factors, developing citizen-centric approaches often requires government to develop new measures of success in how it is leveraging its assets. For instance, a typical measure of success is the amount of visitor traffic to a website; workshop participants cautioned that these types of metrics do not capture the value that can be derived from initiatives such as Community Accounts, which may not have far reach but have come to be tremendously valuable in all facets of provincial life. Hollett noted that the program began with a great deal of skepticism as to its value, and now he is being asked to speak to their experiences in building support for developing similar systems all over Canada and the world.

Hollett's experiences were echoed by Faul, who has been leading the new open data initiative with the City of Ottawa. Initially, Faul and his team were confronted by much resistance to opening up the city's data to the public. To help address these concerns, they organized a "Hackfest" where participants were given access to city data sets and encouraged to build innovative applications using government data. Despite much skepticism from civic officials, Faul reported that one hundred people turned up for the event, including entrepreneurs, citizens, business leaders, and politicians. The success of this event demonstrated the benefits of engaging the community to support the growth and development of an open data initiative.

One concern that was raised in the workshop was the extent to which there is a "digital divide" that may exclude large segments of the Canadian population from accessing information and services that a new citizen-centric system may provide. Participants noted that while this is a real issue affecting many

Canadians, it should not represent a barrier to any data sharing initiatives. David Eaves argued that Canadians' lack of access to Internet technologies is not a reason to stop innovation, as any technological innovations will become more accessible to everyone over time. Others noted that technological innovations can often leap-frog access barriers; Mike Kujawski gave the example of African farmers who may not have access to the Internet but receive up-to-date weather and crop prices over their mobile phones, allowing them to keep pace with changing trends. In many cases, information usage may be driven by a small percentage of the population that have the skills and tools to access it; however, they use it create products and services that enable it to be passed down by the people who need it. Under this scenario, government is doing a disservice by refusing to release information for fear of excluding people. Government should instead be focused on helping people keep up if they do not have adequate access to technology.

Another challenge raised by workshop participants is the concept of "data literacy." Sandi Howell argued that many people are challenged by their lack of literacy and technology skills to participate in these new forms of engagement, requiring government employees to help citizens to learn how to access the data, increasing their essential skillset by learning how to access, analyze and apply the information they need. As a result, this technology is challenging the nature of the government's role in society from information and service provider to skills provider by helping citizens to keep pace with technological change.

While David Eaves noted that the issue of data literacy may be a real challenge for some, using data requires a different type of literacy than reading, for instance. Today, tools are becoming available that are making working with data even easier and more accessible. As a result, public servants should help people access the information in easier, more consumable ways. The role of public servants is becoming more social and linked, and instead of working in a hierarchical, production-oriented framework, public servants need to understand that they need to operate in a more networked fashion to coordinate resources to complete a task. The challenge for many public servants is the bi-focal nature of their position; while they continue to operate in this older framework, they are being pushed to be more innovative.

Pam Lahey and Martine Mangion provided some important insights into servicing the needs of the disability community. They noted that persons with disabilities are often disregarded in broad policy initiatives, and any system that wishes to engage them cannot assume that they will get the information on their own. Poverty is a major issue in this community, and persons with disabilities are often more focused on meeting their immediate needs than finding and accessing information that may not be readily available. Due to poverty and homelessness, many persons with disabilities also have limited access to the Internet.

They argued that the best way to engage persons with disabilities is to work with service providers and organizations that are directly connected with the community, as these organizations are often the primary trusted source of information for the community. Not only will this approach present a more direct method for reaching members of the disability community, it will also provide an important way to ensure that information and services are meeting the community's needs. To ensure that any dissemination strategy is properly addressing the disability community's needs, Lahey and Mangion argued that these organizations should be involved in any dissemination strategy from

conceptualization to implementation. They also cautioned that information needs to be provided in an accessible and understandable format; often government information is text-heavy and difficult to read for persons with low levels of literacy. Instead, it needs to be written in plain language and presented in a simple, easy-to-read format.

What are the key implementation steps (engagement, feedback mechanisms, success factors)?

Alton Hollett recounted how his agency began their process of building the Community Accounts. Instead of being too ambitious, they began by building a simple and straightforward prototype and then asked for feedback from the systems' users on what could be improved. To this day, users are encouraged to give feedback on their usage of the system and the quality of the data it provides. This process enabled the government to innovate a product that was refined according to user needs. He noted that one of the greatest challenges is knowing what data is useful; their feedback mechanisms allowed them to see very quickly how users were making use of the data and how they could improve the system.

Workshop participants noted that research and evaluation should be the starting point for understanding citizens' needs when designing a citizen-centric information system. Participants argued that if you can describe who your client is, it will drive the design of the system, whether your client is citizens, communities, or government employees. David Hume reported that the BC government has started with this approach in redesigning their own online presence, using evidence-based design that relies on usability studies of government websites, service centres and call centres to improve citizens' navigation of government services both on- and off-line. Instead of relying on surveys which ask people what they want, these types of assessments provide a better empirical evaluation of how citizens use government information and tools and of what value it is to them. These comments were echoed by Mark Faul, who reported that they do not rely on user surveys when implementing a change.

David Eaves argued that a new information system could take advantage of information that the government has — or could be collecting — already. He argued that government could begin by recognizing that there is a lot of data that it is already capturing that could be used much more effectively. He referred to this data as “exhaust data,” as it is information that is being tracked but not utilized. For instance, government departments are collecting a lot of data in their delivery of services that could be analyzed to improve their service delivery mechanisms. Beyond doing a better job of accounting for the information already at their fingertips, departments could be releasing this data to other organizations or private individuals to support the innovation of new tools and services for citizens.

Workshop participants also noted that the private sector is producing policy-relevant data as well. For instance, Mike Kujawski argued that the government could be leveraging already-available data from social media services, such as Google, Facebook, and LinkedIn, to help inform policy questions about the labour market, health trends, etc. David Eaves gave one example demonstrating the power of Google search queries to predict actual influenza trend data from the Public Health Agency of Canada (www.google.org/flutrends/ca/#CA).

While maintaining the integrity of data quality is a common concern for open data initiatives, Alton Hollett reported that in their experience, the majority of users have a vested interest in ensuring the accuracy of data and are therefore very willing to be part of the fact-checking and feedback process to improve its quality. David Eaves notes that the UK government's data portal (data.gov.uk) is a leader in this regard, as it allows users to comment on each data set, rate them, and point out errors.

Sébastien Pierre pointed out that a successful open data program is one which leads to a diversity and volume of projects or initiatives. Beyond the sheer number of new initiatives that are based on the shared data, diversity is an important factor as it reflects a versatile platform that can support the development of different types of tools and systems. He also argued out that a program will be more successful if it involves different types of actors, from citizens, researchers, entrepreneurs and government agencies. Active involvement from many different types of stakeholders demonstrates that the system is flexible enough to be relevant to users with many different needs.

In summary

Overall, there was general consensus among workshop attendees on the need for more citizen-centric approaches in the manner which the Canadian government, and in particular HRSDC, manages its key information assets. Already, the government has implemented a series of “client-centred” or “citizen-centric” initiatives. It was argued that the introduction of Service Canada in 2005 represented an important shift towards a more client-oriented service delivery approach. More recently, various government departments, including Health Canada and HRSDC, have launched their own online initiatives, such as Healthy Canadians (www.HealthyCanadians.gc.ca), CanLearn (www.canlearn.ca), and the Working in Canada Tool (www.workingincanada.gc.ca). In March, the Treasury Board launched a government-wide Open Data Portal (www.data.gc.ca) as a one-year pilot project. This pilot will make data available from 10 participating departments, including Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada; Citizenship and Immigration Canada; Environment Canada; Department of Finance Canada; Fisheries and Oceans Canada; Library and Archives Canada; Natural Resources Canada; Statistics Canada; Transport Canada and the Treasury Board Secretariat.¹ It was reported at the workshop that the intention is to double the number of datasets by year-end.

Given these recent developments, a new citizen-centric information system could be viewed as a further development of the government’s current approach; rather than an abrupt — or disruptive — change in policy direction. That being said, there was much agreement that most existing government information services, including existing website and data dissemination initiatives, can still be characterized as “government-centric.” As such, much government programming still does not conform to the definition of citizen-centric approaches which “seek to engage the citizens as owners of and participants in the creation of public services, not as passive recipients of services.”² Under this model, service delivery is being changed from something that is done by government to citizens to an approach where citizens are active co-creators of services, or even where services are delivered from citizen to citizen with no government involvement.

In developing a new citizen-centric information system, workshop participants argued that HRSDC should design a system that reflects the needs of its users — whether they are citizens, communities or civil servants. As workshop participants learned about the BC government’s experience, this new paradigm may challenge existing practices and organizational structures within government, requiring a transformation in the way that government coordinates its information and services, promotes cross-departmental collaboration, and supports innovation in government processes and technology usage. While this task may be daunting, participants also encouraged HRSDC to begin by evaluating the data it already collects as the basis for its new information system. Much of this data does not present a privacy concern if it is shared, and it provides an opportunity to begin developing a data sharing platform that can evolve and develop as more data becomes available.

¹ www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/media/nr-cp/2011/0317a-eng.asp.

² CS Transform. (2010). *Citizen Service Transformation: A Manifesto for Change in the Delivery of Public Services*. London. p. 12 (http://cstransform.com/white_papers/CitizenServiceTransformationV1.pdf).

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