

Chapter VI

Local E–Government Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

In the United Kingdom and throughout the world there is increasing emphasis on public sector organizations working together in local partnerships. Partnerships can potentially encourage the delivery of joined-up services to citizens, promote democracy, and improve public policy making, but partnership working is not always easy and can be challenging for the individuals and organisations involved. This chapter will report on recent research into how English local authorities and their partners work together on electronic government. The research is based on a systematic literature review and a case study of a sub-regional e-government partnership, using a mixed methods approach combining social network analysis with qualitative interviews. The research identifies the importance of network structure to e-government partnerships and explores a number of other significant themes including leadership, accountability, embeddedness, and size of organization.

INTRODUCTION

An increased role for electronic government is a key element in the UK government's modernization agenda, with the aim of improving local government efficiency and increasing its accessibility and responsiveness to local citizens. Local authorities have been encouraged by the government to develop e-government solutions in partnership with others to improve and join

up customer service, maximize efficiencies and economies of scale and enhance organizational and individual learning. The research sets out to examine how local authorities and other public organisations work together locally on e-government, addressing the research question: "How can local authorities and their partners work together to successfully implement electronic government?" The research examines the network of relationships between individuals and organisations

involved in sub-regional e-government partnerships in England. These partnerships, which have received funding and encouragement from the UK government, variously involved officers from different departments within a number of local authorities and other public organisations operating locally such as police, fire and health services. This chapter first introduces literature in the areas of local e-government, partnership working and social networks. It then briefly describes one of three partnerships studied for this research project and explains the methodology adopted during the study: case studies of sub-regional e-government partnerships using social network analysis and qualitative interviews. The network structure of the partnership is described, exploring interconnectedness, centralization and the role of opinion leaders. Other factors contributing to partnership success are introduced, including leadership, accountability, embeddedness and size of organization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

E-government is defined here as the use of computer technologies by government to transform the provision of services and information, improve internal organization, encourage citizen participation and promote sharing between partners. Implementing e-government has implications for all parts of local government. The issues which need to be thought about and addressed include: identifying the key areas for electronic service delivery; considering current and future demand by different stakeholders for access by telephone, face-to-face contact, website, mobile phone etc; re-engineering front-end and back-office systems; integration of different ICT systems; sharing data and services with partner organisations; and an understanding of citizen awareness, interest and access to e-government (Beynon-Davies, 2005). The potential benefits include improved services, cost savings on transactions with citizens, more

efficient procurement, lucrative new markets for private vendors and better joining up of local government with other public sector partners (Fountain, 2001). Another benefit is that e-government can potentially “reinvigorate the democratic process and re-engage citizens positively in political life” (McCullagh, 2003 p149)

But local authorities face significant challenges in introducing e-government including coping with significant organizational change (Fountain, 2001), inequality of access to e-government among citizens (Jaeger and Thompson, 2004; Lee-Kelley and James, 2003), the need to build relations with the private sector (Margetts, 2003; Fountain, 2001) and the costs of introducing new technology. E-government projects aimed at citizens tend to offer access to services and information rather than an opportunity to participate or access information on council performance (Beynon-Davies and Martin, 2004). People are often treated as customers or users rather than citizens (Ho, 2002). King’s study of the implementation of customer relationship management (CRM) systems by local authorities indicates that there has been a focus on providing better access through a range of channels to the same existing range of services. The emphasis has been on resolving enquiries quickly and efficiently. Much less attention has been paid to organizational transformation or joining up across traditional silos (King, 2007). McNeal et al found that the involvement of state officials in professional networks was an indicator of e-government innovation, but that access to resources and citizen-related factors such as education level, voter turn-out and rate of internet use do not drive e-government implementation (McNeal et al. 2003). They conclude that e-government is largely an administrative reform, driven by officials seeking efficiency, rather than a mechanism for democratic participation.

Research into the adoption of e-government among local governments suggests that there are a number of factors influencing the sophistication and successful implementation of e-government

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