

Chapter 3

Mobility and Service Innovation: A Critical Examination of Opportunities and Challenges for the Canadian Public Sector

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the Canadian public sector's efforts to devise mobile service capacities predicated upon efficiency, engagement, and innovation, and how such capacities are intertwined with both the advent of Gov 2.0 and the inertia of traditional public administration. The author's primary focus is on the federal government (Government of Canada), with some additional consideration of provincial governments and inter-governmental dynamics as appropriate. Through three typologies of public sector governance (traditional public administration, new public management, and public value management), the author seeks to better understand these aforementioned tensions – and formulate fresh insights into how governments can pursue the leveraging of mobility as a basis for not only more efficient service delivery but also wider opportunities for public engagement and service innovation.

1. INTRODUCTION

For the public sector, tensions between tradition and transformation have shaped the emergence of electronic or digital government (e-government) over much of the past two decades (Roy, 2006/2013a; Lips, 2012). Most recently, Gov 2.0 has emerged as a proxy for public sector adaption in light of what Gartner Consulting presents as four inter-related drivers of transformational change: mobile, social, information (or data), and the cloud (Gartner, 2012). Whereas the ethos of Gov 2.0 is largely one of openness, networks, and widened participation, the pillars of a traditional public administration model often (often labelled the machinery of government) remain rooted in information secrecy and hierarchical control. Importantly, most all democratic governments now openly acknowledge tensions between both orientations, much as there remains a wide spectrum of potential response ranging from guarded and incremental to more ambitious and novel.

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Of the four Gov 2.0 drivers identified by Gartner, we adopt mobile (or mobility) as our starting point and primary focus. As depicted by the quote above, mobility denotes both smaller and more powerful computing devices on the one hand (in particular smart phones and tablets), and the relational and cultural implications of a wireless Internet for individuals, organizations, and society at large. Despite the adoption of mobility as the centre-point of this undertaking, it is important to underscore how Gartner's four transformational drivers are closely inter-twined with one another. For example, the nexus between mobility and social becomes apparent when Facebook announced early in 2014 that more than ten million Canadians (or nearly one third of the population) had become daily active users of the social media platform via a mobile device. Moreover, the devising of open data strategies by governments at all levels features an important mobility dimension as many such strategies have featured apps competitions to facilitate the innovative usage of data holdings for public interest pursuits via mobile devices.

Within this setting, this article examines the Canadian public sector's efforts to devise mobile service capacities predicated upon efficiency, engagement, and innovation, and how such capacities are intertwined with both the advent of Gov 2.0 and the inertia of traditional public administration. Our primary focus is on the federal government (Government of Canada), albeit with some consideration of provincial governments and inter-governmental dynamics as appropriate (by contrast, municipal governments though noted at times are largely excluded from the examination). The methodology underpinning this largely qualitative investigation entails observational data from various inter-related sources including: prior studies of digital government in Canada undertaken by the author and other parties as referenced throughout the article; a specific study on mobility and government commissioned by the Canadian public sector (and furthermore used as a basis for a series of discussions with officials from all government levels in Canada); and a supplementary set of twelve interviews with various experts and officials from inside and outside of the public sector with respect to the themes explored in this article and the current efforts and readiness of federal and provincial governments in Canada. While the Canadian public sector as a whole (encompassing federal, provincial and local levels) comprises our broadly defined case study for this exploratory and preliminary investigation, the Government of Canada is the primary jurisdiction under review by way of a number of direct and indirect sources (the direct sources being the aforementioned interviews and commissioned study; the additional, indirect sources referenced throughout). Through a better conceptualization of the pursuit of mobile service capacities within the public sector, we seek a greater understanding of the organizational and institutional variables likely to shape their future evolution and performance.

The article is organized in the following manner. Building upon this introduction, some additional context around mobility, Gov 2.0 and service delivery and innovation is provided in section two. Building on this context in section three, the governance architecture is examined through three contrasting typologies that illuminate the tensions at play: traditional public administration, new public management, and public value management. Section four then extracts from this examination a set of critical lessons for reform that are likely to be key determinants of leveraging mobility as an enabler of Gov 2.0 capacities that capture benefits tied to more efficient service delivery, wider openness and public engagement, and collective learning and innovation. A brief conclusion then summarizes the over-riding findings of this article and provides some avenues for future research.

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