

Chapter 84

Advancing Local E-Government: Acknowledging and Developing the CFO Role

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ABSTRACT

E-government developments suggest positive changes are unfolding for local government, but hopes for a technology-driven future have outpaced knowledge of how e-government opportunities can be translated into action. This chapter argues that the existing gap between the e-government rhetoric and reality is due in-part to ineffective leadership and that the CFO is an underutilized resource. Remedies are sought by examining the dynamics of local government implementation and considering ways the CFO role could be reengineered while respecting local government needs and realities. The result is a look at a largely undiscovered e-government landscape offering new opportunities for improved leadership and more desirable e-government outcomes. Recommendations are offered for improving both practice and the academic research knowledge base.

INTRODUCTION

There are many perspectives on the level of e-government success in local governments, but most would probably agree that efforts to-date have produced a mix of excitement, accomplishment, and disappointment. Hopes for transformational change have gone unfulfilled, and the shortfall is

especially poignant in the case of local governments, given their traditional focus on citizens and service. The need for improved performance remains, but it is now clear that additional progress requires more than coercing local officials with a technology stick.

Meeting local e-government challenges will require new ways of thinking and acting at all organizational levels, and this transformation must include more effective policy processes—

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translating strategic goals into action, and this is an area where CFOs can play a critical role. Oddly, though, mention of the CFO is missing from most writings about e-government and local government management. Indeed, the role of the local government CFO has received scarcely any focused attention. Even the nature of the finance management job is ambiguous. The term CFO will be used in this chapter for the sake of simplicity, but all local government finance officers do not carry this label. (They are known as clerks, budget officers, treasurers, comptrollers, et cetera.) Also, like many other government administrators, their authority levels vary from one jurisdiction to the next. These many differences across CFO positions may have obscured important commonalities, however. All these different types of financial officer's play an important role in addressing roughly similar existential challenges. As this chapter will discuss, the local government CFO is currently an underutilized resource, and better engaging the CFO is at least a partial solution to e-government concerns that have been simmering in recent years.

Evidence of a change in CFO responsibilities abounds, but public administration research is locked into silos like technology applications; city management; general public administration; and the related areas of budgeting, procurement, and contracting. A broader perspective and new linkages are needed. Reconsidering the CFO role could help get this process started by connecting some now disparate elements of the policy process. It may also help start a process of reform that changes the role of the local government CFO in positive ways and improves local government management capacity. Calling attention to this important element of local government management will also spur academic research on the role of the local government CFO that could enhance conceptual clarity and refine the local government knowledge base.

While this chapter is focused on the United States experience, there are just a few avenues

available for public administration progress wherever you go on the globe, and the issues described here are widespread. The CFO perspective on local e-government implementation is certainly new in the United States, in contrast to CEO-centric approaches that have not been the fast lane to e-government progress in most cases. Considering alternate approaches to e-government implementation may well bring widespread benefits. The themes explored here stress an increasingly competitive environment and the importance of setting goals and accomplishing them. As is often said, nothing is going to change if you keep doing the same things, and reconsideration of the local government CFO role is long overdue.

Moving E-Government Forward

Public administration reform does not occur in a vacuum. There is a history to the field, existing commitments, and powerful driving forces that provide a foundation for change and long-term development. Many reform elements exist, but four are essential to implementing e-government in the local government setting and to the change agenda pursued in this chapter: public administration professionalization, business skills development, new public management, and integrative leadership. These four elements overlap and interact with each other and e-government in potentially powerful ways. A quick look at each of them will illustrate the opportunities they offer and their limitations.

Public Administration Professionalization

The tradition of public administration professionalization stresses commitments to the development of public administration knowledge, public service, societal values, and democratic processes, which can provide important guidance for developing the capacity of local government finance officers and improving policy leadership.

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