Chapter 6

Public Sector Knowledge Networks: Measures and Conditions for Success

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on success in Public Sector Knowledge Networks (PSKNs). These networks are especially salient in the context of e-government where expectations for innovation and good performance rest on creative use of data, information, and technology. PSKN success can be assessed at the network, organizational, and individual levels by considering measures of structure, performance, and interaction. Beyond success measures, however, the chapter also discusses the conditions for success—the critical success factors—that create the environment for individual, organizational, and network performance. These considerations of success are illustrated with case examples that offer lessons for practice and new avenues for research.

INTRODUCTION

Network forms of organization and action are becoming more prevalent in the public sector. Because they generally represent greater and more diverse resources and information, networks are often considered better suited to deal with complexity than single, traditional organizations (Goldsmith and Eggers, 2004). Networks take various forms and are established for different purposes. Some are designed to take advantage of different skills and capabilities in service delivery or professional practice, others are organized to marshal expert and public opinion in order to influence government policy. This chapter focuses specifically on public sector knowledge networks or PSKNs. Their purpose is to share and exchange knowledge, information, and expertise in a domain...
of policy or practice where full understanding and effective action transcend the capability of any single organization. These networks are especially salient in the context of e-government where expectations for innovation and good performance rest on creative use of knowledge and information. Many aspects of e-government require that information be shared, merged, compared, and assessed across the boundaries of organizations or sectors. Health care, environmental management, financial market regulation, educational reform, and a host of other public goals rely in part on the ability of professionals and organizations to share knowledge and information within policy and practice networks. This chapter addresses three related questions regarding these organizational forms: What constitutes success for a public sector knowledge network? How can success be measured? What environmental conditions encourage success?

This chapter begins with a description of PSKNs and then draws on salient literature on interorganizational relations and collaboration as a point of departure for discussing network success. PSKN success is then discussed at three levels of analysis (network, organization, and individual) by considering success measures associated with structure, performance, and interaction. This section also discusses the conditions for success—the critical success factors—that create the environment for accomplishing individual, organizational, and network goals. A set of empirical case studies is then introduced to illustrate the variety of PSKNs and associated elements of success. The chapter concludes with lessons for practice and ideas for future research.

**BACKGROUND: PUBLIC SECTOR NETWORKS**

The concepts and challenges of networks are important to understanding the operation of the public sector and the performance and prospects for e-government. Network thinking and action are necessary to address the demands of the “wicked” (Rittel and Webber, 1973) and “tangled” (Dawes, et al., 2010) problems that confront the public sector. Wicked problems cannot be divided into logical parts, assigned to suitably experts, and brought back together into a comprehensive solution. They are more organic and have multiple causes and interacting effects that do not lend themselves to traditional division-of-labor approaches. Welfare reform, community safety, and effective schools are examples of wicked problems. Tangled problems are somewhat smaller in scope but very common throughout government: negotiating the maze of programs that can serve a disabled child, developing positive relationships between a university and its local community, or deciding how to cut back a school budget in economic downturns.

Network forms of organization are needed for other reasons as well. Political demands for broad inclusion in decision making and implementation favor networked forms of governance involving diverse stakeholders and communication channels. And layers of overlapping mandates and regulations in nearly every domain almost guarantee unexpected, even perverse, outcomes unless administrators recognize and deal with a cross-cutting networks of requirements and actors.

Traditional government agencies tend to inhibit easy knowledge sharing due to hierarchy, division of labor, and compartmentalization of expertise. These separate and often isolate practice domains, knowledge resources, and routines into areas of specialization that tend to operate independently. They reflect traditional lines of authority, formal reporting relationships, and established policy frameworks that do not encourage—and may even prohibit—many forms of information sharing and cross-agency collaboration. Organizations structured in this way are not well-suited to deal with complex challenges like environmental stewardship, global financial regulation, or urban development. For these kinds of challenges, something