Chapter II

Planning for Information Technology in the Public Sector

Introduction: Why Plan?

Experts agree that formal strategic IT plans should not only be done, but they should also be revised regularly at least on a yearly basis (Barrett & Greene, 2001). Reed (2003) cites data from the Government Performance Project that high-performing governments tend to update their plans one or more times during a year. Raumer (2001) points out that with the cutbacks in governmental budgets, IT projects are no longer rubber stamped but must make their business case and argues that the strategic planning process is needed to set sound priorities. The term business case refers to a case based on solid business reasons such as increased revenues and/or decreased costs that are expected to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the organization and may be contrasted with changes for non-business reasons such as for prestige and “keeping up with technology.” Failure to plan adequately has led to serious problems. For example, Ward (2003) has argued that organizations must plan their intranets or the intranets will die. He cites examples of intranets that have failed and have to be restructured frequently because they were done “on a whim” of management with no clear direction and became political “footballs.”

In this chapter, I discuss the key issues and problems encountered in planning for information technology. In particular, I will focus on the logic behind prescriptions to do planning and the challenges and complexities that occur in planning for IT. I also seek to explain why planning is often not done at all or not done according to the recommendations laid out by experts.
Despite general agreement that planning for IT is important, many governments do not have formal IT plans. Moulder (2001) found that only about 6% (41 out of 691) reported that they had a “current” plan concerning IT. Another study (Schulz, 2001, p. 18) found that about 29% of cities had technology plans and that the existence of plans correlated strongly with city size. In my own case studies of local governments, fewer than half of the small to moderate-size municipalities that I visited had formal IT plans. Even those departments that did have IT plans generally did not revise them on an annual basis. Often they would do a 3- to 5-year plan and did not revise it until the period ended and often not even then.

Why do so many governments lack formal IT plans or not keep their plans updated? First, many IT heads are skeptical about the utility of IT plans because they believe that IT changes so quickly that spending a great deal of time on formal planning is futile. Steve Steinbrecher (2000), head of Contra Costa, California’s IT department was asked how IT will change over the next five years and replied that he had “no idea” and that he could not plan or “strategize further than 18 months out.” One head of a small local government IT department also felt that a formal plan would not be very useful because of the rapidity of change:

* I have an IT vision. I don’t have a formal plan. I have no clue where we are going to be in a year. I know that we will continue with a more secure system. I will know that we will continue to try to improve on minimizing downtime.... So we don’t really have a plan because I can’t foresee the future. Technology changes so quickly and I also believe we are fairly ahead of the curve right now.... We are on the leading edge of the curve...that is my perception. I don’t have a clue as to what is going to happen next. I think we are going to have to hold for a while...changes are very hard to find right now.

Beaumaster (1999, pp. 81-82) conducted a study of IT planning in small and medium-sized governments in the state of Virginia and likewise found that 66% did not employ a strategic technology planning process and only 25% said they did any kind of formal IT planning. At the same time, she (Beaumaster, p. 84) found that a majority (57%) admitted that they did not think that their planning process was effective.

Other IT directors take the position that a very general plan outlining broad objectives is okay, but generally they only had a one-year working plan required as part of their budgetary process, not a long-term strategic plan, and did not feel that detailed planning for the future would be useful as the following director put it:

* We plan every year based on what our budget is, we meet every quarter to see where we are with that annual plan, what we don’t have and what is requested with us is to develop that strategic plan. And I think that that strategic plan needs to be done with generalities like, “What are you doing with wireless? With your hard-wired infrastructure? What are you doing with your plans for disaster recovery? Where are you going to go with your efforts to get into those departments and review those processes...if you are going to create a plan with all of the checkmarks of here is what I am going to do in year 1, year 2, etc.,... It is too much a moving target....
Designing, Implementing, and Evaluating User-centered and Citizen-centered E-government
www.igi-global.com/chapter/designing-implementing-evaluating-user-centered/42547?camid=4v1a