Chapter XI

Information Technology, Accountability, and Information Stewardship

Introduction

Over the past two decades, there has been an unabated demand for more accountability from public organizations. The term “accountability” is employed with a variety of different meanings. I view the purpose of these assessments as responsiveness to public or external values. As Meijer (2001, p. 234) points out, accountability is a practice rather than an outcome. The essence of accountability is the idea that an individual or organization “is held to answer for performance” and public organizations should be responsive to the values of their customers (Meijer, 2001, p. 259). For example, we do not want to allow professors to over-concentrate on research and ignore teaching, so now many states require that institutions prove that students are achieving their goals, such as obtaining jobs and passing professional examinations. In other words, the purpose of accountability mechanisms is to achieve responsiveness to external values held by the public and the constituencies served by public agencies. Although most accountability reports tend to emphasize quantitative performance measures, qualitative assessments of the adequacy of performance may also be used to achieve responsiveness.
Public organizations of all kinds are being asked to prove that they are achieving their goals. There is a consensus that measurements that emphasize inputs and processes are inadequate to ensure that governmental organizations are being responsive to public values. The underlying assumption behind this consensus is that employees will tend to act in their own self-interest and not be responsive to public values, unless their performance is monitored. The focus on measurement of outcomes may provide public organizations with information they need to improve services as well as to provide positive information to the public about their accomplishments.

Information systems now play a central role in the movement to achieve the desired responsiveness. Many data elements that are aimed at measuring outcomes are being added to information systems so that the public and oversight bodies can determine if governmental organizations are doing a good job. The increasing sophistication and power of computerized information systems allows the tracking of hundreds or even thousands of indicators that would have been difficult or impossible in previous eras. Information systems now enable the general public to view these outcome measures on the World Wide Web. Thus performance indicators are easier for the public to access than earlier attempts at providing accountability. Information technology is also being employed to provide ways of holding agencies accountable by attempting to control for contextual factors that have often made it difficult to measure success in the past. Likewise, information technology is also beginning to be used to detect both fraud and errors in information provided by agencies that may frustrate efforts to achieve responsiveness to public values. Wholey (1994, p. 16) states that programs need “relevant” and “feasible measures” that can be obtained at “reasonable cost” in order to correct weaknesses and perform better. Gormely & Weimer (1999, p. 143) found that organizational report cards, though initially resisted, brought about positive change in the performance of certain health organizations. Quantitative assessments may help to provide guidance to public employees on what works and what does not work and thus allow them to focus on superior methods and better allocation of time (Gormely & Weimer, 1999). They may also prevent self-serving behaviors such as over-concentration on personal goals, laziness, and waste of resources.

**E-Reporting**

The new element in accountability is the ability to increase access via the posting of governmental information on the World Wide Web. This movement has been referred to as “e-reporting” by Lee (2004). Prior to the World Wide Web, there was probably a very small percentage of the population who would be willing to go to local governments or their libraries to access publications that provided information on governmental performance, if that information even existed. Since people can now access accountability reports from the convenience of their own homes, the existence of e-reporting increases the likelihood that they will access this information.

There have been several other interrelated forces that are pushing governments to gather and report more performance information. The Federal Government Performance Results