Chapter XIX

The Challenges of Building a Knowledge Management System for Local Collaboration

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Executive Summary

This chapter provides a case study of building a knowledge management system for collaboration between local governments. It describes the management and development of such a system including Web sites and online search and submission of collaborative agreements. It also stresses the importance of coordination and management support for a multi-party development team. Data quality assurance should also be an integral part of the data collection and migration from a paper-based to an electronic system. The authors hope to shed light on the interrelated components of building a knowledge management system on collaboration. Moreover, the findings of the case study inform the practice of managing a multi-party development team.
Background: The Need for Knowledge about Inter-Local Collaboration

Local government collaboration has been a topic for policy discussions among local governments in Iowa for decades. In recent years, however, it has become a hot policy topic with the legislature and governor. This case examines an effort by Iowa State University (ISU), the Iowa Department of Management (IDoM), the local government associations in the state, and the state’s Chief Information Officer (CIO) to create a knowledge management system that includes converting hundreds of boxes of paper agreements into a Web-accessible database on inter-local agreements in Iowa. The outcome of this project is a public policy tool that will enhance the ability of local governments to collaborate on the wide range of public services they provide, and for citizens and policy makers to be able to monitor and contribute to the public policy discussions about inter-local collaboration.

Inter-local agreements in Iowa are governed by chapter 28E of the Iowa Code, which authorizes any public agency in the state to enter into an agreement with one or more public or private agencies for joint or cooperative action. These agreements are popularly called 28E agreements, and communities formalize collaboration by using 28E agreements in a variety of areas, including economic development, traffic patrol, mental health services, water and sewage treatment, and many others. All 28E agreements are required to be registered with the Iowa Secretary of State and the local county clerk.

Until this project, nobody could describe the extent of 28E agreements, nor the scope of activities covered by 28E agreements. The Iowa Secretary of State (SOS) has approached management of the 28E statute with indifference, registering and warehousing the filings as required by the law. SOS obtains no revenue from the filings and consequently has dedicated minimal staff to the effort. Compliance with the 28E statute has been very uneven; some cities and counties are more likely than others to use the 28E statute and file their agreements with SOS. In addition to the formal 28E agreements, cities and counties may also collaborate with contracts that are not registered with SOS. These agreements are usually referred to as Memoranda of Understanding, or MOUs. Finally, public agencies, especially cities and counties, often use a variety of informal “handshake” agreements to provide public services to citizens. When the governor and legislature increased their interest in local government collaboration in 2003, policymakers found that they lacked data upon which the debate about the effectiveness and efficiency of local governments could be based. The Iowa League of Cities (League) and the Iowa State Association of Counties (ISAC) could only query members for examples to present legislators with evidence that local governments were collaborating to increase service efficiency. One researcher with an interest in a particular type of 28E agreement related the painful and very inefficient process of spending hours (several years ago) looking through boxes and boxes of warehoused agreements searching for the type of agreements he was studying.

The Public Policy & Administration Program at Iowa State University (PPA) approached the League, ISAC, IDoM and the state’s CIO to suggest that these organizations collaborate to create a knowledge management system that would convert the papers filed in boxes by SOS into a Web-accessible database that would:

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