

The big chill

E-Government poses many promises for the enlightened age. But will it save us from red tape or deliver us into evil?

By Erik Heinrich

Lori MacMullen, CIO for the province of New Brunswick, is a straight-talking Maritimer who doesn't like to beat around the bush. Maybe it's the paralyzing winter storms that whip themselves into a frenzy over the Bay of Fundy before moving inland to the capital Fredericton that make her impatient. Or maybe it's her upbringing.

Whatever the reason, the way MacMullen sees it all unfolding, the e-government revolution shaking up the public sector, in much the same way the French Revolution gave Europe a kick in the pants in the 18th century, is being driven by conflicting priorities. On the one hand the public wants integrated, easy-to-access services — everything from renewing a driver's license and applying for a passport, to registering a new business — available online 24/7. And on the other hand it's afraid of what Big Brother might do with too much information at his fingertips.

After all, who wants a faceless bureaucrat in Ottawa, or any one of the provincial capitals from Victoria to St. John's, Nfld., calling up your marriage certificate, income tax returns, parking violations and virtually anything else he wishes to see, with a few mouse clicks? The potential for abuse — whether it's identity theft or the doctoring of records — is too great to ignore. And truth be told, it makes people feel a little paranoid.

"We need to change the public's image of government from the George Orwell, 1984 thing," says MacMullen, referring to the late British novelist's dark, science-fiction novel about what can happen to a society if technology falls into the wrong hands.

Then MacMullen shifts gears, "It's not all about trust because no one trusts government. It's about doing government better." And here MacMullen has hit the nail on the head. In today's wired world, all governments regardless of jurisdiction have to jump on the Internet bandwagon. But what makes this migration tricky is the fact that e-government is not just about making use of an electronic channel to deliver programs and services that have traditionally been available only through grey men and women in nondescript government offices.

It's about reinventing the way government does business. And that requires slaying the Hydra-headed monster known as red tape to make government more efficient. Consider that in New Brunswick the owner of a typical gas station/convenience store needs 13 government permits from nearly as many departments.

"The Web makes the delivery of programs and services faster and cheaper than ever," says MacMullen. "But if you do it in departmental silos you also annoy citizens faster because they're still getting the runaround, except now it may be happening at 4 a.m. in the morning."

Asking civil servants to think outside their departments will require a huge cultural change. MacMullen compares it to asking Scotiabank, Canadian Tire and Tim Horton's to deliver their respective services under one umbrella. The old adage about teaching old dogs new tricks comes to mind.

But unless government can combine related programs and services in clusters that cross departmental and agency lines, e-government in this country is doomed to become a monumental flop.

Given the challenge of integration, combined with the public's mixed feelings about an online shop with overtones of Big Brother that takes care of their needs from cradle to grave, how are Ottawa and the provincial governments faring in their quest to turn e-government into a utopian reality?

The federal and provincial governments have been paying lip service to e-government since 1997. But in that time little more than baby steps have been taken. The Public Sector CIO Council (PSCIOC) — whose membership is made up of federal CIO Michelle d'Auray and her provincial and territorial counterparts, including MacMullen, who is also Council co-chair — is the main body spearheading the e-government movement across Canada.

"The Council is enormously helpful in facilitating an exchange of approaches," says Helen McDonald, director general of government online (GOL), the federal government's code name for creating an electronic pipeline to the public. "E-government is something none of us have done before and we're learning from each other."

That's all well and good, but an exchange of ideas does not an e-government strategy make. Still, the biggest push toward the utopia of e-government is under way in Ottawa where the civil service is striving to become known around the world as the central government most electronically connected to its citizens by 2004.

Also, by becoming a model user of the Internet, the federal government hopes to encourage the public at large, and small-to-medium sized enterprises (SMEs) to more fully embrace the information revolution.

Will Prime Minister Jean Chrétien achieve his lofty ambition? It appears at least he is willing to pay for his grandiose vision. Over a period of two years beginning last February, the feds planned to spend \$160 million making GOL a reality. That will see them through to 2002. But how much more will have to be spent to achieve the 2004 objective is anybody's guess at this point.

"It's too early to say what the total cost will be," says McDonald of GOL.

This much, however, is known. The federal government's 126 departments and agencies offer 1,600 programs and services. To date only a tiny fraction of that total — probably less than 5% — has migrated to the Web.

The most high profile among them is probably NetFile, rolled out in 2000, which allows Canadians to e-file their personal income tax returns without the aid of a third party. Another is an online job bank created by Human Resources Development Canada that receives millions of hits each month.

Under GOL, the plan is to migrate the offerings of the 28 biggest departments and agencies, including Human Resources, Revenue Canada and the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, to the Web.

"If we want traction we have to focus on the big departments with the broadest reach," says McDonald, noting such services as passport and unemployment insurance applications will have the highest priority. Also near the top of McDonald's list are programs and services aimed at the private sector — everything from registering a new business to finding export opportunities, or helping international investors move capital to The Great White North.

Why aren't some of these services already available online? The short answer is the federal government has been sidetracked by privacy and security concerns. They are undoubtedly important and have to be resolved before the feds can join the fast lane to e-government. But the feds have been too slow in launching Secure Channel — the technology infrastructure needed to ensure online transactions with the public are safe.

Indeed a deal with a private sector consortium — still to be named — is not expected to be signed before this April. Another hindrance to GOL was the fiasco in May 2000 over a Big Brother database at Human Resources, which had links to other departments and as many as 2,000 pieces of information about almost every Canadian. In the end, Minister Jane Stewart was forced to dismantle her database — created without the knowledge or consent of Canadians — amid a public outcry and pressure from federal Privacy Commissioner Bruce Phillips.

When it finally arrives, GOL will not be delivered through a common window, or one-stop shop. Instead, programs and services will be clustered around subject headings such as small business, taxation and health information.

"Seamless government does not necessarily mean a single portal," says Barbara Kieley, managing director of Deloitte Consulting's Ottawa office. "A community of portals is an appropriate strategy."

Thomas Paece, secretary of administration responsible for e-government in Pennsylvania, disagrees. His state relaunched its e-government initiative in October 2000 by introducing a common window for all government programs and services.

"Before that, each department had a static Web page and that wasn't working very well because you had to know where you wanted to go," says Paece. "Now you can do a query that takes you where you need to go."

Paece adds residents of Pennsylvania mainly use his state's e-government portal for renewing drivers' permits, obtaining hunting and fishing licenses and reserving camp sites in state parks.

How is Ontario, this country's most populous province, faring when it comes to e-government compared to Pennsylvania, which has about the same population? Not great. In fact, the province offers only four e-government services: registering a business, checking traffic on the province's 400-series highways, buying government publications and booking a camp site.

Perhaps more to the point, the province lacks a clear vision of how it wants e-government to evolve. "We can't move forward aggressively until we resolve security and privacy issues related to e-government," says Ontario CIO Scott Campbell. "We've just finished a lengthy consultation process and we're reviewing policy options."

That sounds all too familiar. Add to this the fact that Ontario is still unsure whether it wants to pursue a single-portal strategy for e-government. And that computerization of the province's land-registry system has become a disaster featured on nightly newscasts. Under this scenario it's hard to imagine Ontario will achieve its goal of becoming a world leader in e-government by 2003.

Back in New Brunswick things are not looking much rosier. "We're just getting started with e-government," says MacMullen. "I can't begin to estimate what it will cost."

MacMullen is, however, more lucid on another point: she's personally more comfortable with the public sector having reams of information about her than the private sector. "Government is about me and my life," says MacMullen. "The private sector is about me and my desires."

Fair enough. But the thing Canadians desire most right now is integrated e-government services that simultaneously cross departmental lines and respect their right to privacy. Not endless hand-wringing by government over security.