

Ballmer: "Governments have the opportunity to make life easier for their constituents by recognizing how the role of 'consumer' and 'citizen' are complementary."



The promise of e-government

By Steve Ballmer

Words like "agile," "efficient" and "responsive" are seldom associated with the delivery of public services. But now a wide array of technologies—from PCs to Internet browsers to high-speed network connectivity—is changing all that.

More than 20 mayors representing cities across the United States met in June 2001 to explore the opportunities of "e-government." Held in New York City, the conference brought together municipal government leaders, academics and private-sector executives to share ideas about how technology can enhance the way governments operate and serve citizens.

New York City's then-mayor, Rudolph Giuliani, presented his city's goals to reduce costs, eliminate bureaucracy and become more open, responsive and accountable. As part of this effort, New York City now has an official website that lets citizens perform a wide range of transactions, including paying a parking ticket, applying for a dog license, searching for a city job and finding out where to get a flu shot.

Increasingly, governments at all levels—from cities to state agencies to nations around the globe—are exploring how technology can enable citizens to interact with government in a more convenient and efficient manner.

For governments, the benefits are clear: quicker response time, reduced costs and more accessible services for constituents across a wide spectrum

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of needs. Like most businesses today, governments are increasingly taking advantage of technologies—powerful PCs, integrated productivity applications, Internet browsers, high-speed network connectivity, new security solutions like digital signatures and exciting new standards like extensible markup language (XML)—to achieve these benefits.

For their part, citizens are increasingly demanding more agile, efficient service from government. They're asking: If I can buy clothes for my child, book a vacation and pay my bills online, why can't I renew my driver's license or pay my taxes online too?

The United Kingdom's Government Gateway initiative is a great example of government heeding the call. It allows people to securely access services online 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Now its citizens and businesses can submit tax returns over the Internet, and farmers can submit claims for subsidy payments. Britain is striving to make all government transactions accessible through the Gateway by 2005—including such services as registering a newborn, applying for a travel visa or registering a vehicle.

In the United States, Pennsylvania, under former Governor Tom Ridge (now the US Director of Homeland Security), implemented a government portal—the PA PowerPort—that provides citizens free access to e-mail service and allows them to file taxes, find quality child care, search for a job or renew a driver's license. Eventually the portal will provide integrated access to the state's educational institutions, helping teachers, administrators, parents and students stay

more closely connected and better informed about academic programs and opportunities.

Virtual government

These increasingly sophisticated government Internet portals not only improve service to constituents; for the first time they allow citizens to interact with government as a single entity rather than as a collection of "siloes" public agencies. Government Gateway, for instance, integrates approximately 150 agencies across local, regional and national levels of government in the United Kingdom.

By integrating the websites for various municipal agencies, New York City allows for much simpler navigation and enables citizens and businesses to interact with what is much closer to a single virtual government. This proved vital in the wake of the events of September 11; the city's website gave people a single point of access to the mayor's office and the fire, police and health departments, as well as information on services from different departments available to victims' families.

The Pennsylvania Chamber of Business and Industry illustrates another useful role government can play through the innovative use of technology. The chamber provides an online B2B marketplace—called PA Chamber xChange—that matches buyers and sellers quickly and conveniently. A buyer simply types in a request for a product or service available in Pennsylvania, and interested sellers respond with competitive bids. The online marketplace is a new tool through which government can support economic development that particularly benefits smaller

businesses, which might not otherwise be able to take advantage of the Internet to compete in the digital world.

What's more, Pennsylvania Open for Business, accessible through the government's PA PowerPort, offers entrepreneurs a single, centralized location to get all of the information and forms they need to start and grow a business in Pennsylvania. The website guides them through information and filing requirements, allows them to complete business filings over the Web, and provides a secure and private data folder (called Your Briefcase) for filing forms and information. Startups can explore the availability of business names, search for a business site location, file taxes, identify potential job candidates and report new hires. And because PA PowerPort automatically links and shares data among agencies, entrepreneurs need only enter information once.

Pennsylvania also has significantly improved communication and collaboration among state agencies. When Ridge was governor, he called for the state to deploy a common technology infrastructure across 47 agencies to enable seamless information sharing and collaboration. Using one technology platform alleviates the administrative burden and allows employees to focus on getting their jobs done rather than on navigating different systems with different formats and access requirements. In just three years the state saved \$9.2 million in software costs and is expected to save an additional \$9 million annually in its total cost of ownership.

Procurement is another area where online technologies can make a big

difference. A typical e-procurement system can reap 10 percent to 20 percent savings in terms of operational expenses, as well as provide significant savings on material-acquisition costs. When you consider the size of many government budgets these days, the potential savings are substantial indeed. When the North Atlantic Treaty Organization applied technology to its procurement system, it found that the investment paid for itself in about five months.

Citizen consumers

Beyond reducing costs and improving services for citizens and businesses, what else can governments achieve by employing information technology? Governments have the opportunity to make life easier for their constituents by recognizing how the role of "consumer" and "citizen" are complementary.

Today we think of our dealings with governments as separate from our daily lives as consumers, but, in fact, they are often related. We need to go to city hall to get a permit for remodeling our house and then to the lumberyard for the materials to do the job. We go to one place to get fishing gear and another to get a fishing license. An opportunity exists for governments to collaborate with private enterprises to provide a more convenient, integrated service to their common customers.

We also are seeing ways in which governments are using software to anticipate and address constituent needs in a more proactive way. That's what Massachusetts is doing through an ambitious project called MassCARES, spearheaded by the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, with support from Governor Jane Swift.

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MassCARES is a Web-based system designed to enhance the delivery of a wide range of human services, including health care, substance abuse and early education programs. It builds on a decade of successes in which the commonwealth has used collaborative, databased strategies to address social issues, including youth homicide, the rise in the number of uninsured children and the need for more after-school programs for children with working parents.

For example, in the mid-1990s Massachusetts recognized that to address the escalation of youth violence, it needed to bring together a variety of groups,

including municipal government, the police department, the district attorney's office, churches, community groups and youth services organizations. By sharing data, the state was able to focus on the communities with the highest rates of juvenile crime, high school dropouts and teen pregnancy. The state government, in partnership with these groups, then took steps to realign resources according to need. Massachusetts credits this collaborative approach with helping it dramatically reduce its youth homicide rate.

MassCares integrates data housed within 15 separate legacy systems across the state's health and

human services agencies. This enables the appropriate sharing of information among state, local and federal agencies; much deeper data analysis; and more effective strategies for delivering resources to citizens, as well as much better monitoring and tracking of results. By getting the right data into the hands of the right people early on, resources are now being more effectively targeted to anticipate and address social problems.

As technology helps evolve the delivery of government services, the role of the government employee will evolve too—to that of knowledge worker. For example, instead of having to spend time helping citizens fill out forms, a government employee could use data and analysis to support strategic decisions, such as which school to enroll a specific child in or where to build a new factory.

Online parliaments

Governments today have a tremendous opportunity to make use of current technologies to build e-government infrastructures. For example, the United Kingdom and Australia are taking advantage of existing technologies while championing the adoption of open standards like XML.

Over time the Internet will also enhance democratic governance and expand the policy- and regulation-making processes to include a broader range of individuals and communities of interest. The Swiss Parliament, for example, has opened up its sessions to online audiences, providing live webcasts of parliamentary debates, archives of past debates and meetings, schedules for future sessions and explanations of the issues the legislature will address.

Meanwhile we are seeing the emergence of online political discussions that can enable governments to build a new, more inclusive relationship with citizens. Use of the Internet to increase dialogue and give-and-take about a broad range of issues—including technology-driven subjects such as privacy, security, trade and the “digital divide”—will be a healthy and welcome addition to the political process.

Of course, technology is only one way in which government can become more efficient and responsive to public needs and concerns. But just as it has played an important role in making businesses more agile and productive, so too can it empower governments and citizens. ■

Steve Ballmer is chief executive officer of Microsoft Corporation. Since joining the company in 1980, Ballmer has headed several company divisions, including operations, operating systems development, and sales and support. In July 1998 he was promoted to president, a role that gave him day-to-day responsibility for running Microsoft. He was named CEO in January 2000.