E-Government In NYC

by Laura Forlano
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You may not know it, but you are living in the capital of electronic government, or one of them anyway. But, how many of us have actually looked up a restaurant?s health inspection or paid a parking ticket online? What does being the hub of e-gov really mean for New Yorkers? Can it help us solve the budget crisis?

New York City ranks second in the first annual Digital Cities Survey by the Center for Digital Government and Government Technology magazine. The survey compared New York with other cities of more than 250,000 people and ranked them as follows: Honolulu took first place; Chicago, New York and Seattle were second; Colorado Springs and Houston were fifth; Charlotte, Indianapolis and Tucson were seventh and Atlanta, Phoenix, San Diego and Tampa ranked tenth.

In addition, New York City won first place in the Center for Digital Government's national 2001 Best of the Web competition has won over 25 other awards for their use of telecommunications and technology in local government.

So, New York City is good at e-gov, but what exactly is it? Most simply, e-government is the adoption of communications technology by the public sector to deliver information and services. Just as technology has allowed the private sector to increase efficiency, when applied in government, technology has the potential to greatly streamline bureaucracy. The stages of building an e-gov from a bricks and mortar government are relatively simple. First, the focus is on online access to content and forms, next on the ability to conduct transactions, and, finally, on creating comprehensive portals or one-stop government sites.

NYC.gov is the city's main e-government portal. The site has more than 30,000 pages of content and 100 online transactional services. Online transactions include paying parking tickets, viewing property statements, obtaining birth and death certificates, or finding out your recycling and garbage collection schedule. The ability to access information and conduct transactions online was extremely important after September 11 when many New Yorkers found e-mail and Internet access to be their only reliable form of communication. The city's well-developed e-government portal allowed emergency information to be posted and updated regularly during the crisis.

According to Cathilea Robinett, executive director of the Center for Digital Government, "New York City has an extremely robust site. It is one of the few local government sites with a citizen customization component. It is easy to navigate and the section titled, 'I want to' is perfect for intuitive citizen use."

The current success of NYC.gov is partly a result of former Mayor Rudy Giuliani's strong support of e-government initiatives. According to Stephen Ronaghan, project manager for the United Nations Global Survey on E-government, "New York City's e-government program is one of the most complete that I've seen from any level of government. The websites are user-friendly, content is well organized and they offer online capacity for nearly every city-service that can be offered over the Web."

Clearly, New York has made it to the most advanced stage in the development of e-government. Now the challenge is making sure that people are using it. According to U.S. News and World Report, less than one percent of all citizen-to-government transactions are handled online. In order to justify the investment in e-government, this figure needs to increase dramatically.

However, currently, awareness of the ability to conduct government services online is low and access to computers among some segments of the population is lacking. In recent years, we have seen a number of e-government companies emerge and sometimes disappear, such as GovWorks, which was profiled in the movie Startup.com. Their demise points partly to this lack of awareness among citizens. This has prevented NYC.gov from being used extensively by citizens to conduct transactions rather than to obtain information only.

We all know that Mayor Michael Bloomberg is tech-savvy. His success as the leader of a financial information company with cutting edge technology and his transformation of City Hall into an open office equipped with 35 high-tech terminals donated by his company proves it. However, the mayor's official e-government policy has not yet been announced and it remains to be seen whether e-government will suffer a 20 percent cut along with the rest of city government.

The city is facing a potential $4 billion deficit and enhanced e-government services offer the possibility to help shrink this number in the long run. As we have seen in the private sector, online transactions are fast and efficient. While initial investment in technology is necessary, typically, e-government programs are run with a relatively small number of employees. This is true both for NYC.gov and FirstGov , the United States' e-government portal.

The challenge for Mayor Bloomberg is to make sure that New Yorkers know about NYC.gov's extensive offerings so that the maximum number of transactions are conducted online. In addition, greater coordination is needed between NYC.gov and the web sites of city agencies. While it is fine for agencies to maintain their own autonomy online, there should be consistency between the web sites of different agencies. Some agencies have yet to update their sites to reflect their relationship with NYC.gov.

So, stop by NYC.gov and take the tour. You too can help decrease the city's deficit.

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