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5. Concluding the Process

One of the most significant issues in developing an effective eEngagement process is careful planning of the post-implementation activities for the project. This has two elements:

- developing an appropriate and robust approach to *meaningful* evaluation, particularly when there is a need to justify the activity in a highly rational (budgetary-focused) operational environment – an increasingly common concern; and
- developing an effective *closeout* process.

5.1. The Importance of Evaluation

There is little need to reiterate the importance of evaluation in the public sector. Calls for discussion of debate around and methodological experimentation with evaluation have been hallmarks of public sector management reforms for the past decade. Any project initiated in the public sector today will make provision for evaluation as a standard operating procedure.

In the context of a new type of activity, however, careful consideration of evaluation is important. This is because:

- while most (if not all) governments in Australasia stress the importance of public participation and engagement, the practical commitment of governments is often quite variable. The relative newness of these activities often creates an environment in which novel or innovative approaches to community engagement are often subject to higher levels of scrutiny and assessment. This, combined with the potential to generate greater levels of feedback about the process itself, can put the innovating public sector manager under a degree of scrutiny not shared by managers following ‘tried and true’ (but possibly ineffective) strategies to engage the public;
- the area is new and requires grounded, honest evaluation of the cost and benefits of a range of different approaches. While it is likely that eEngagement will continue to be an important part of the armoury of public sector managers for the foreseeable future (if not increasingly important over time as our society develops greater levels of technical sophistication and complexity), effective and practical evaluation of the vast array of models and techniques will lead to better means to assess the benefits of one approach over the other, making planning faster, implementation easier and the outcomes more effective; and
- the use of ICTs can support new approaches to evaluation, increasing the effectiveness of this part of the management process and leading to higher levels of understanding about what works and what does not, than in offline

activities. This is a direct result of the interactivity of the media employed and their capacity to support the automatic collection of user data.

5.1.1. Approaching Evaluation for eEngagement

The exact nature of evaluation will be highly variable depending on the mechanisms and approaches employed (and objectives). Whyte and Macintosh¹ provide a useful conceptual tool for evaluating eEngagement activities, focusing on political, technical and social outcomes of the project or process. This approach is recommended for any eEngagement activity and asks the following questions:

- *political evaluation*: Did the process follow best practice guidelines for undertaking consultations that are published by government and were the stakeholders satisfied with the process? The evaluation factors here are similar to those for conventional consultations but need to be answered by different means;
- *technical evaluation*: To what extent did ICT design directly affect the outcomes? In designing the e-consultation there is a need to take account of the technical skills of the target audience and locality of the participants. Here, we can take as our starting point established evaluation frameworks from the software engineering and information systems communities, together with considerations of usability and accessibility; and
- *social evaluation*: To what extent did the social practices and capabilities of those being consulted affect the consultation outcomes? In particular, what bearing do these have on the relevance of consultations to the consulted citizens, the relevance of their contributions to each other and to policy makers and the nature of the interaction?

5.1.2. Pitfalls to Avoid

Common traps to avoid in developing the evaluation framework are:

- *over-emphasis on technical assessments*: Technical issues are often easy to document and can be clearly presented in terms of equipment 'up time', budgetary management and ease of systems implementation. While these issues are important, it is important to keep them in perspective and not lose sight of the broader objectives (e.g. technology merely facilitates the process, it is not the end product);
- *excessive use of simple metrics*: Many consultation processes are assessed purely on the basis of number of participants, or amount of content generated. While this has an important role, it is critical to also ask:
 - 'right people' versus 'many people';

¹ Whyte, Angus and Macintosh, Ann 2003, 'Analysis and Evaluation of E-Consultations', *e-Service Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, <http://www.e-sj.org/e-SJ2.1/esj2_1_whyte_macintosh.pdf>

- what are the characteristics of the people engaged (e.g. were ‘new’ people brought into the process, does information flow through these people to a wider audience – are they ‘influentials’?); and
- *picking the right comparisons*: If the eEngagement process has been implemented to assess a consultation or participation deficit, the particular approach used will be assessed against the previous state of play (before-after assessment), rather than with other examples that use the same technology or methodology – these latter types of comparisons are often of limited value.

5.1.3. What to Consider in Effective Assessment

When developing the assessment approach, it is important to consider:

- the extent to which the technology can support longitudinal assessment processes (e.g. performance measurement over time, or reducing a long ‘end of process’ survey into a series of small polls);
- user views and experiences (sometimes best expressed qualitatively). Consider allowing the users to develop and present their own evaluation frameworks (a variation on self-assessment reporting);
- ‘knock-on’, capacity-building, or social capital formation outcomes (skills transfer, mobilisation, organisational outcomes and benefits); and
- the development of real-time and automatic metrics. A good example of this would be the ability to incorporate comprehensive analyses of user browsing patterns with respect to online information (e.g. pages viewed, time spent viewing each page, pages with highest levels of referral to others, etc.). These metrics allow us to analyse (for better or worse) the value of our content in a way that print run numbers of consultation documents cannot. These statistics can often be provided by the service provider (such as the website hosting service or from the telecommunications provider) or through commercial services (e.g. Nielsen//Netratings).

Exhibit 29: Evaluation Example – Local Issues Forum Success Measures (longitudinal)

2-3 Months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • forum is still active • some regular traffic • experiencing some membership growth • city / community officials are aware of forum / may be reading posts • some community organisations have begun to post announcements in forum
6 Months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 25-50 percent growth in subscriptions since launch • local media is paying attention to discussions • 10 or more 'regular' posters (post at least once per week) • participants are starting new discussions • regular participation in steering committee communications and meetings attract a diverse group of community members
1 Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • elected officials and city / community staff are participating – most lurk, but some post • 50-100 percent growth in subscriptions since launch • occasional story in local media that originates from forum • some examples of citizen or government action that have resulted from forum discussions • you have hosted at least one in-person gathering or party for participants to meet one another

E-Democracy.org 2005, *Local Issues Forum Guidebook*

5.2. Closeout Processes

A common failing of many consultation processes is a failure to consider and plan for the end of the eEngagement process. This tends to reflect an instrumental view of the process which holds that, once the information has been collected or the decisions reached, the engagement is over.

This can lead to:

- a failure to fully and appropriately document the process when the lessons of the process are freshest; and
- 'orphaning' the participants, either by not providing them with appropriate levels of information about the outcomes, or by neglecting a possible valuable future resource of interest to stakeholders.

Clear planning for the closeout process will require:

- an appropriate commitment of time (staff time);
- a publication schedule for information (feedback); and
- possible re-investment in *cultivation* of the stakeholder community.

5.2.1. Document Process and Outcomes

It goes without saying that the relative newness of eEngagement, combined with the rapid pace of change (both in the capacities of the technology and the costs of undertaking activities using ICTs) mean that – for the immediate future at least – practice will continue to outstrip theory.

Following the conclusion of any engagement activity – online or off – it is necessary to prepare a suite of post-engagement documentation which normally takes the form of:

- formal reports on outcomes;
- internal reports on project management (costs, user responses, etc.);
- public seminars and debriefings; and
- ‘bottom line’ accountabilities (budget reporting).

Given the newness of this area of activity, it is important for many of these (often internal) documents to be shared with the eEngagement community, i.e. those who are actively pursuing the area of practice, those interesting in undertaking activities and those not aware of the potential. This often necessitates the development of case study information – the repackaging of information provided to a range of stakeholders in a complete encapsulated form.

Good case documentation will include:

- a clear outline of the background (issue, agency, jurisdiction, culture);
- an articulation of what type of initial decisions were made;
- discussions of technologies employed;
- a discussion of activities, including unforeseen issues;
- evaluations of outcome (short, medium and longer term and a ‘balance of assessment’ statement);
- unresolved issues;
- issues for future application – often these processes generate large numbers of innovative ideas that cannot be taken up at the time, but would be of great value to managers contemplating emulating the model; and
- contact information (including for partner organisations).

One of the important aspects of this documentation needs to be a clear statement of the managerial *learnings*: namely, the ‘lessons learned’ at the managerial level about handling ‘intangibles’ (such as upwards and downward management, stakeholder issues, etc.). While there is an excellent array of case studies now being developed, attention to subtle management questions will be one area of particular interest to others in your position.

5.2.2. Feedback

A common criticism heard from many consultation and engagement participants is the lack of feedback from government agencies on the outcomes and decisions made from the information received.

Maintaining good post-engagement relationships is important in maintaining citizens’ motivation for civic participation and the inclusion of eEngagement projects can be a valuable means by which feedback is delivered at low cost. The low cost of email, fax and SMS communications, together with their capacity

to deliver multimedia content, makes the provision of feedback relatively straightforward and can stimulate further, or future, participation from members of the target community.

Feedback should contain:

- a summation or means by which large documents/information can be accessed quickly and easily (such as an appropriate executive summary for a formal reporting process, fact sheet, or information bulletin);
- notification of the results of the eEngagement process: what decisions have been reached, what plans or processes are to be implemented, where the issue has advanced in the decision-making process (if the consultation is an early part of a longer process of policy development);
- where there is significant variation of opinion or disagreement, balanced reporting of the range of opinions or perspectives and information about reasons for the selection of specific options (either because of majority voting outcomes in deliberative processes, or the basis for decisions made in purely consultative ones);
- collection of 'opt in' permissions to contact the participant again for future engagement processes (either on a similar or unrelated subject) to develop a larger database of stakeholders; and
- 'big picture' views about the scope of the eEngagement process, such as the number of participants, timescale, etc. Where eEngagement processes involve little or no personal interaction, participants can often lack a sense of the number of other participants (unlike in the traditional 'town hall' style meeting) and so knowing the scope of participation will place the legitimacy of the outcome in context.

The provision of feedback regarding specific instrumental (policy specific) outcomes of the process can be an appropriate point in which stakeholder views on the conduct of the engagement process can be collected (if this has not already been done). It is important to note that the quality and nature of feedback provided at the closeout stage of the process will also be assessed for future reference.

Exhibit 30: Maintaining Contact – Address Lifecycles

When collecting contact information from participants (to allow information to be ‘pushed’ to them), the limited ‘life expectancy’ of contact information must be considered. While email is often considered an excellent communication channel because of cost and speed, it can also be highly *temporal*.

Consider the limitations of various channels based on the life expectancy of their use:

- email addresses are notoriously short lived, possibly lasting only between 1-3 years on average. This is often associated with changes to ISP connections, employment changes and the tendency to ‘shed’ addresses that have become targets for high volumes of SPAM messages. People who have a lasting valid email address tend to be in long-term employment. The life expectancy of *Instant Messaging* addresses (such as Microsoft or Yahoo! Messenger, Skype, etc.) is unknown at this time, but may also be short;
- residential addresses are relatively long lived, approximately 7-8 years on average, however, this average is highly variable and tends to be a function of stage-of-life (marriage, children) and the age of the individual. As a general rule, the younger the adult, the more likely they are to change residential address; and
- mobile telephone numbers may prove to be one of the most enduring contact addresses for participants in eEngagement processes, particularly following the introduction of MNP (mobile number portability – the capacity to retain a fixed mobile telephone number even following changes of service). Australia introduced MNP in 2001 and New Zealand is expected to do so in 2007-8.

Given the short life expectancy of contact addresses and telephone numbers, it is wise to collect a number of contact details from participants for future engagement and follow-up. Delivery failure using one channel can then prompt the use of alternative approaches.

5.2.3. Feedback Over Time

In some policy deliberations, it may be wise to establish an ongoing process of feedback provision to participants. This helps maintain public interest in the issue and personal commitment to participation by citizens.

On-going feedback is most appropriate where:

- the policy development process is ongoing (e.g. the eEngagement process was at the start of a wider policy-development process, such as a

parliamentary consultation, where executive decision-making supersedes the initial eEngagement activity);

- the consultation leads to a policy or project implementation process, allowing participants to observe the translation of policy into public action;
- a subsequent executive decision has reversed or significantly altered the initial conclusions drawn from the consultation process (a change of policy); and/or
- there is a desire to stimulate an active, or passive body of concerned citizen oversight, such as the establishment of a transparency network. In this case, allowing citizens access to a shared community space where they can contact each other and discuss the issue will be required. This type of approach can serve as the interface between formal eEngagement processes and wider eDemocracy stimulation and capacity building.

Exhibit 31: Transparency Networks

Transparency Network is a term used to describe organically connected groups of organisations and individuals who share information and oversight of the activities of policy makers, government agencies and corporations. The participants of the network can include policy insiders, non-government organisations, scholars, journalists and members of the community. Based around loose network organisational structures and using ICTs, (email, discussion lists, websites), these networks collect and distribute information and can act to highlight issues or problems that emerge in their area of concern. Good examples of transparency networks can be found in the environmental movement, where large numbers of quasi-autonomous actors and groups can mobilise and organise over environmental issues and policy processes.

By nature, these networks are outside of government and largely outside of formal eEngagement processes (though members of transparency networks are often found in formal consultation and participation processes). Governments are increasingly responsive to these networks, both positively (providing greater access to oversight information, inclusion in consultation processes) and negatively (secrecy), depending on the ability of the networks to utilise their members' resources to challenge policy decisions and implementation (often in tandem with mainstream media). Transparency networks share many similarities with the notion of 'policy communities' from mainstream public policy literature, but may take a more 'outsider' role.

See: http://www.agimo.gov.au/publications/2004/05/egovt_challenges/accountability/transparency

5.2.4. No Closeout: The Eternal Community

While careful management of the closeout process can involve ongoing communication with participants, the conclusion of a formal process of eEngagement may not mean the 'end' of the process. For example, instrumental processes often lead to the creation of on-going communities of interest or relationships with the hosting agency through the development of formal reference groups, participants transition from 'passive' to active overseers of government policy and the future re-use of consultation mailing lists.

In addition, in areas where the expected benefits of the engagement strategy are broad and diffuse, the project may have an expectation of stimulating the development of a 'community of interest' around the policy area or agency that is relatively self-sustaining over time. Clearly, the toolsets provided by ICTs to the public to self-organise and network outside the direct intervention of government, represent a key strength.

eEngagement processes can result in the mobilisation of an ongoing community of interest. Public sector managers can be instrumental in fostering these communities of interest via a cultivating approach and drawing value from them by exercising a listening role. Public sector managers should consider the following:

- has the process generated support for the creation of an ongoing community of interest?
- do the participants have the tools necessary to act on their desire to maintain an ongoing relationship *with each other*?
- what benefits would this provide to ongoing policy development and implementation (and hence, what is the cost-benefit of stimulating activity)?

Examples of active roles public sector managers may play to cultivate these types of ongoing outcome are:

- ensuring information flows to participants;
- planning a listening strategy after the closeout of the formal eEngagement process;
- cultivating interactions between stakeholders through the provision of toolsets (email list software, wiki engines, etc.) to the community;
- 'rewarding' communal activity through *ad hoc* or informal meetings or gatherings; and
- determining means by which 'listening to the community' can be demonstrated (e.g. periodic email contributions to discussion lists on topics raised in these communities, pro-actively taking forward issues of concern, etc.).

The end may be just the beginning of a new phase of engagement.

Exhibit 32: Wiki's and Collaborative Tools

A 'wiki' is a popular term for collaborative software which allows anyone participating in the development of the content to edit what is published or presented. Good examples of wiki's include the free online general encyclopaedia Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page) or the Davis Community Wiki (<http://daviswiki.org/>).

Wiki's require the establishment of motivated communities, authoring and collaboration tools, storage space and mediating and arbitrating processes for managing version control. Other examples of collaborative approaches to online publishing would include:

- slashdot (<http://slashdot.org/>)
- e-the People (<http://www.e-thepeople.org/>)