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Lac Carling seeks meaningful citizen dialogue

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(2007-04-30)

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Public sector organizations are keen to embrace the more interactive online applications of Web 2.0 technology, but innovation is being held back by a lack of IT skills in human resources, according to recent findings from a global survey of senior government executives.

Sponsored by Cisco Systems Inc., the survey cited "innovation in technology" as a high priority for governments that wish to keep pace with citizens who are increasingly using interactive online services as a way of everyday life.

Delegates at the 2007 Lac Carling Congress, which kicked off at Niagara-on-the-Lake in Ontario yesterday, say they recognize government services provide them with a key to connect with citizens. The question is how to engage the public more actively in order to better serve their constituent needs.

"Citizens really do want to be engaged in the processes and decisions that affect them, and it's up to us in government to make sure we allow them to do that," says Hazel McCallion, the long-serving mayor of Mississauga, Ont.

To keep pace with Mississauga's rapid growth over the past decade, McCallion says the city conducted a highly active citizen participation program that included her own television show, which she used to open dialogue with citizens, and a 311 call centre for non-emergency services. Mississauga also set up focus groups of key individuals that Council could work with on specific issues.

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Similarly, the Province of New Brunswick aims to engage citizens in "communities of purpose," says Joan Kingston, Premier Shawn Graham's principal secretary of government affairs. "There are certain things government can't do alone," says Kingston, pointing to aspects of public health, education and workforce skills that require changes in public attitude and behaviour, rather than government decrees.

McCallion suggests the biggest problem with government services in Canada is the three-tiered governance structure that distributes accountability and responsibility across the federal, provincial and municipal levels.

Calling government service delivery a "can of worms," McCallion says the overlap and duplication that exists across the three levels is costing billions of dollars. "We've done an excellent job in our country of confusing the public. Citizens don't care about which level of government they get service from, they just want the service," she says.

Nik Nanos, president and CEO of SES Canada Research Inc., says the online tools available through Web 2.0 technologies are creating a new force of citizens who are more empowered, more engaged and more vocal.

"These online tools are beginning to tip the scales of power," he says. "Ad hoc communities of interest are able to organize themselves and mobilize very quickly."

For government, this means service has to be seen as much more than merely a transaction in a database. "Service delivery becomes a dialogue: it's a relationship between government and citizen."

Networking giant Cisco polled 84 attendees at its Public Sector Summit in Stockholm last year to measure government priorities in IT innovation. Results of the survey suggest government officials are far from being grey bureaucrats, but instead are keen to embrace collaborative Web 2.0 technologies such as wikis, online forums and social networking, says Cisco.

"The government is trying, but it needs to find out what people are specifically interested in. More of a dialogue has to occur," says Serena Cassidy, a new Masters graduate at the School of Public Administration at Dalhousie University in Halifax.

"I expect government to take advantage of these networks of online communities and tap into them. This is how my generation connects, because they're on the computer a lot."

As an example, Cassidy points to the Government of Australia, which conducts e-polls and citizen forums that allow for immediate feedback and which really appeal to the younger generation.

"Governments around the world recognize that to reach out to its citizens, they must adopt the methods of the younger generation, who spend much of their time online," says Yvon Le Roux, Cisco's vice-president for public sector Europe, in an interview with InterGovWorld.com from London, England.

However, Cisco's research also revealed that the main issue holding back transformation in the public sector was a lack of skilled employees, political uncertainty and aversion to change. "Public sector organizations are keen to embrace innovation to help deliver citizen-centric services, but may be held back through factors such as a lack of skilled personnel or funding," says Le Roux.

"This is as a direct result of government still operating in very siloed program and policy frameworks. There's a disconnect across jurisdictions and departments that in turn leads to very strong resistance to change," he says.

Governments that are adopting a shared services approach are learning to overcome some of these problems by unlocking substantial budgets currently tied up in the duplication of efforts, adds Le Roux. Shared services split resources across several departments by means of common IT infrastructure and business processes in back-office functions such as finance, administration, HR and procurement.

The Cisco executive cited Canada, the United States, the Netherlands, Germany, the United Kingdom, Australia and South Africa as among the leaders in shared services.

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