

# Five Challenges Government Faces When Adopting Web 2.0

By [Dennis D. McDonald](#)

In these heady days of [transition](#), as we think about ways to improve government, it's tempting to over-sell the benefits of "Web 2.0."

I personally believe in Web 2.0 tools and techniques and how they can support what I call the Three C's of Web 2.0: Collaboration, Content, and Communication. Just on [my own blog](#) I have more than 100 posts tagged with the term [web 2.0](#).

As a consultant, project manager, and company executive I have real world experience with how organizations and communities approach -- and sometimes resist -- the adoption of new technologies. Change takes time. As a result, I'm much less given to Web 2.0 evangelism than to practical reality.

The following are five important issues that need to be addressed as we think about ways that Web 2.0 can help "transform" government:

1. Infrastructure Versus Application
2. Command and Control Realities
3. Government vs. Private Sector Priorities
4. Interaction of Formal, Informal, and Secure Communications
5. Cost Realities

## 1. Infrastructure vs. Application

Government agencies are forever re-organizing. This creates a mish-mash of hardware and software architectures that government IT managers are forever trying to modernize, integrate, and coordinate. Due to the government's reliance on external contractors for so much of its IT work, and the cumbersome nature of government contracting, there is a natural lag in adopting new systems, especially systems that require much change and process management work. Also, new and innovative applications may get lost in the press of imposing order and structure on the basic infrastructure.

## 2. Command & Control Realities

Military and intelligence organizations have certain advantages in adopting Web 2.0 processes and systems; they already have secure systems and processes set up internally. In the military the chain of command can mandate changes in technology and process.

Civilian agencies and those that interact continually with state, local, and international organizations don't have the same ability to push through change. "Getting people on the same page" technologically is always a challenge. This impacts Web 2.0 adoption.

## 3. Government Versus Private Sector Priorities

In government work, business drivers such as making money, reducing costs, and speeding up the process don't necessarily carry the same weight as they do in the private sector. Bureaucracy, interest group politics, and constituent demands can trump arguments for efficiency. Also, legislatively mandated programs can't change overnight, even if the technology were available to do so.

## 4. Interaction of Formal, Informal and Secure Communications

Whenever you have different communities interacting you have an opportunity for friction to be generated. So it is with government and Web 2.0. Examples include the incorporation of social media and social networking into disaster response communications, navigating the relationship between the public and private sectors in the publishing of intellectual property, and streamlining government procurement:

- First responders need secure and standard communications. We learned that with ferocity on September 11, 2001. Yet we've also seen in recent years how the public has embraced modern communications technologies to rapidly proliferate on the ground experience about disasters as they occur; witness Virginia Tech, California wildfires, Katrina, etc. You'd think that mechanisms would be already in place for authorities to take advantage of social media and social networking technologies in disaster situations, but we still have a very long way to go.
- Traditional processes for communicating, reviewing, and publishing scientific and technical information have evolved over many centuries. Careers and R&D funding decisions are made with a complex interplay of formal and informal processes. Changing these processes, not surprisingly, is viewed as threatening by those who understand how the real world of scientific progress is conducted. It is no wonder that political and policy tugs-of-war occur whenever proposals are made to involve the government more directly in publishing, on the one hand, or to "open up" scientific communications to blogging and wiki based platforms outside traditional association or publisher control.
- In an effort to streamline government procurement, a variety of government agencies have "outsourced" selected procurement responsibilities to private sector prime contractors. The theory is that prime contractors will, as part of omnibus or blanket contracting arrangements, "pre-qualify" various contractors and subcontractors so that, when procurement requirements are released, the process of reviewing and qualifying successful vendors will be streamlined. This outsourcing of procurement responsibilities has had at least two negative effects: (1) small and medium sized businesses are now required to establish profiles and relationships with multiple vendors, and (2) potential bidders are removed even further from communicating directly with those in government who can speak most authoritatively about the government's requirements.

## 5. Cost Realities

I cringe whenever I hear someone promoting Web 2.0 solutions as being "low cost or free." Granted, the software licenses and per seat and support costs for enterprise oriented Web 2.0 applications suites may actually be lower than other "enterprise" oriented ERP or content management packages. But any IT business manager worth his or her salt will tell you that the technology is not where the organization will be incurring its greatest costs. This concern comes into play when we start thinking about actually replacing formal structured customer support operations with more collaborative solutions, as suggested by Andre Di Maio of [Gartner](#).

If you are a government agency operating a large call center, for example, where you are constantly under the gun to increase the number of calls you receive that are completed through automated processes, what happens when you begin adding social networking with external groups to your mix of services and realize you now must hire a crew of additional "community managers" to support these additional external communities of users? Can you assume that users will transfer from the phone in call center to the web based social software based system? Or will you be tapping a new user group that previously avoided using the phone based support? If that's the case, what will the impact be on your staffing costs?

## Discussion

Now, I personally believe that there are approaches that can be taken to address these issues when they arise. I'll be addressing these in the week ahead. Meanwhile, what do readers think? Are these issues readily addressable? Have I missed something? Please comment below!

## Related Reading

- [How Much Will Your Enterprise Web 2.0 Project Cost?](#)

- [School Communications & Emergency Response: What are the Implications for Social Media?](#)
- [Using Collaboration Technologies to Accelerate Innovation in Federally Funded R&D Programs](#)
- [There's Nothing Wrong with the Social Networking Industry that Some Honest \(Cost\) Information Won't Fix](#)
- [How Can Community Based Social Media Support the Next Census?](#)

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