Book Reviews

The Future of Government

Books Discussed:

Wolfgang Michalski, Riel Miller & Barrie Stevens, eds.
Governance in the 21st Century
OECD, Paris, 2001

Douglas Holmes
E-Gov, an E-Business Plan for Government
Nicholas Brealey Publishing, London, 2001

 Reviewed by William Sheridan

What the Experts Think
The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) convened a
conference of political theorists to contemplate the future of governance in the context of
the information age and the networked society. This book publishes the papers presented
at that conference, held on 25 - 26 March 2000 in Hanover, Germany. All of the papers
are well researched, well written, and very thought provoking.

Both countries and governments in the modern world are based on an agreement, the
Treaty of Westphalia, signed by European elites in 1648, ending the Thirty Years War
and guaranteeing the sovereign independence of nations. The rise of global markets,
planetary ecology, and the United Nations have finally rendered that treaty obsolete. The
challenge of governance in the 21st century is to find a suitable replacement for it.

Daniel Tarchys of Stockholm University thinks the answer is simply less government.
Kimon Valaskakis of the University of Montreal argues that the need for social control at
the global level must be the standard against which to search for solutions. Perri 6 (one of
the participant's real name) recommends the development of a better capability for
judgment to handle bigger, more complex, faster streams of events.

Charles F. Sabel of Columbia Law School advocates that the lessons learned by dynamic
companies be adopted by governments in an effort at democratic experimentalism.
Martin Albrow of the University of Surrey emphasizes the need to recognize and respect
the growing diversity which all governments encounter. And Gilles Paquet of the
University of Ottawa offers subsidiarity as the best principle to allocate proper powers to
the appropriate level of government. All of these points are well worth considering.

What the Governments Do

The Internet and its most famous facility, the World Wide Web, have widespread public acceptance in the developed world. The same people who exchange e-mail and do online banking now want government services over the Net. Governments have got the message, and they are moving much of their information-based services onto the Internet. Douglas Holmes, a Canadian, living in Paris, and working for Microsoft, has written the definitive description of the current progress of electronic delivery of government services, who can and cannot access them, and what the future holds for participatory policy and electronic voting.

G2C (government to citizens) services are growing in quantity, but NOT quality. What Holmes thinks is needed is an adaptation of a business model to government. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) keeps track of customer preferences so that services can be customized to recognize individual differences. Holmes recommends Citizen Relationship Management, wherein government develops the same recognition of and respect for their constituents. He spells out what the implications would be.

G2B (government to business) shows how cooperative exchanges of information between bureaucrats and companies could ease the regulatory burden AND speed workflow considerably. Holmes demonstrates that government procurement could be faster and better, and networked assistance for international trade could benefit both companies (profits) and the public (prosperity).

G2G (governments to governments) is the area where there is the most room for improvement. Departments within governments need to share data and cooperate on the development of programs that address systemic problems. Holmes shows how electronic cooperation between governments could streamline development processes, track occurrences that span jurisdictions (criminal activities, pollution dispersion, etc.), and coordinate joint ventures (approvals, timetables, evaluations, etc.).

In the first part of the book Holmes gives many examples of projects implementing G2C, G2B, and G2G -- there are notable successes already, but much more needs to be done. The remaining two sections of the book give case studies of current best practices, and challenges that are looming in the foreseeable future. If this topic interests you at all, this is the benchmark study to read.

About the Author

William Sheridan is an Advisor on Knowledge Management with Informetrica Limited.