11. Speeding Government Services by Adopting a No Wrong Door Strategy

By Elaine C. Kamarck

Introduction

Two decades ago, the words “customer service” were rarely applied to the operations of government. Then in 1993, President Clinton issued, at the urging of Vice President Gore’s National Performance Review, Executive Order 12862, calling on the government to set “customer service standards” so that “the standard of quality shall be equal to the best in business.” Many of the standards produced dealt with the speed with which services would be delivered: how long customers would be on hold on the phone, how long a wait for services at the passport office, or a veterans hospital, or the post office. And these standards were benchmarked to comparable private sector services.

While this call for faster, customer-centric services was welcomed by many, and was modeled on the British government’s adoption of Citizen Charters, it was not popular with everyone. The Clinton administration faced criticism from those who argued that citizens were not the customers of government; they were the owners of government. Nonetheless the concept stuck because it expressed, in a succinct fashion, how reformers thought citizens should be treated by their government. Fueled by renewed attention to customer service in the private sector and the information technology revolution, government innovators began to transform the customer or citizen experience in the public sector in much the same way that private sector innovators had done.

Throughout the 1990s, the customer service revolution spread as innovators in the public sector learned from the private sector and from each other. During the 1990s, motor vehicle departments throughout the United States started to study companies like the Walt Disney Company for how they managed long lines. Other agencies studied high-performing companies like L.L. Bean to see how they used complex toll-free phone systems.

The United States was not unique in the attention given to service delivery. In 1991, the United Kingdom’s Citizen’s Charter movement forced national and local governments to lay out explicit standards of service delivery and to make them widely available to citizens. In 1997, the Australian Conservative Party government launched a unique experiment called Centrelink aimed at the consolidation and improvement of delivery in the nation’s complex array of social welfare benefits. In 1999, the World Bank began to incorporate best practices in service delivery into its lending strategies in the developing world.

Moving Toward Integrated Services

In the past 20 years, technological advances and an increasingly wired population have led to yet a second generation of improvements in citizen service. Back in 1993, a major goal of the federal government’s re-inventors was simply to get government agencies that delivered services to citizens, such as the Internal Revenue Service, to stay open on Saturdays.

Today, government strives to deliver as much information and as many services as possible through the Internet. A first step in service integration was the development of web portals that include services from more than one government organization. The federal government runs a portal called Benefits.gov, which takes the citizen through a simple series of questions and with a minimum of hassle identifies the federal programs that he or she might be qualified for. Similarly, New York City runs a site called Access NYC Information, "a public screening tool that you can use to determine the city, state and federal health and human service benefit programs for which you are potentially eligible to enroll."

"Integration" has replaced "transaction" as the holy grail of service delivery in the 21st century . . .

A second step toward better integration is now taking place in Virginia. One of the biggest problems with seamless service delivery is the fact that programs, even within one state or one city, can have very different information requirements—bogging citizens down in an endless cycle of paperwork. Virginia is launching an ambitious program to standardize all citizen-facing data. Eventually this program will allow for one entry point for determining eligibility to programs, enrolling in programs, and for self-service.

At the turn of the 21st century, the goal in customer service was to move transactions to the Internet. Today, in most countries in the world, citizens who have access to the Internet can find a wide variety of government information online. In the advanced democracies, citizens can also complete a substantial array of government transactions online. In the United States, most states allow citizens to renew driver's licenses or car registrations online. The U.S. federal government, along with the national governments of many other countries, allows citizens to file income taxes online—something that 70 percent of U.S. taxpayers now do. Local governments allow citizens to pay parking tickets and other fines online. "Transactional government" was the goal of e-government enthusiasts a decade ago.

Today, few remember the days when going to the Department of Motor Vehicles took up the better part of a workday. In spite of significant advances in service delivery, citizens are still frustrated with government and trust in government is at all-time lows. In 2011, trust in the U.S. federal government dropped below 20 percent—15 percent in a CNN poll and 19 percent in a Gallup poll. Of course, improvements in service delivery alone are not likely to solve the government's trust deficit, but government innovators have been acutely aware of one important fact about service delivery: citizens often do not know and do not care what level of government can meet their needs. For the citizen, government is, more often than not, one undifferentiated entity. Given the dizzying array of governmental bodies in the United States especially, it should come as no surprise that citizens are often confused and frustrated from trying to figure out whether they need to be searching for services or information from the federal, state, or local government.

Thus, as government innovators search for ways to improve service delivery even more, focus has turned to something called the No Wrong Door approach. The goal is to have citizens' issues dealt with seamlessly through a central portal regardless of whether those issues are federal, state, or local. "Integration" has replaced "transaction" as the holy grail of service delivery in the 21st century and represents a major challenge to the Obama administration as it begins its second term.

Challenges to the Integration of Social Delivery

So how realistic is the goal of integration in service delivery? What are the barriers to offering citizens a No Wrong Door approach? Integration of service delivery across levels of government requires solving technical and political problems.

Challenge One: All levels of government need to agree on a common technology architecture. This is probably easier in a small country than in a big one. In the United States, governmental forays into e-government have proceeded in a thoroughly random fashion. Initially states and localities went their own way, contracting with a wide variety of providers to design everything from parking ticket payment systems to property tax systems. Many of those early contractors, companies such as EZGov, either went out of business or were acquired by larger companies. All the big IT companies, from IBM to Microsoft, are in the government business today.

Technical advances in lowering the cost and increasing the sophistication of computing make the creation of common infrastructures today less difficult than it would have been even 10 years ago. Familiarity with transforming legacy systems into more modern integrated systems is now easier than ever as well. However, the political challenges remain. Developing common agreement across federal agencies and with states and localities on privacy, data sharing, and the sharing of administrative costs for developing and maintaining an integrated service delivery system have yet to be surmounted and pose the greatest barriers to service integration.

Challenge Two: Coming to agreement on a common identity management framework. This is a challenge for both technical and political reasons. Obviously a secure and common way to identify citizens is important to the creation of a No Wrong Door approach to service delivery. Virginia is leading the way among states by passing a law requiring standardization of all citizen-facing data. But this concept on a national level is very problematic. With the exception of a short period of time after 9/11, when Americans were open to the idea of a national identity card, Americans have never been very enthusiastic about releasing too much data to the government.

An example of this reluctance is American resistance to the standardization of health care data, long a major goal of health care reformers. Resistance to giving too much data up to the government is a major difference between the United States and other countries, where national identity cards and health records are more accepted by the citizenry. In the United States, the public is much more concerned about privacy from the government. These concerns make any effort to standardize identity for the purpose of online transactions controversial. Over time the convenience of No Wrong Door service delivery might overwhelm Americans' reticence on this issue, but the fear of a national identity card—real or virtual—will complicate matters.

Challenge Three: The federal system. The biggest impediment toward better service delivery via the No Wrong Door approach, however, is federalism itself. The beauty of federalism is that it allows for competing values (and therefore policies) to coexist within one national framework. In fact, the reason many countries adopt federalist systems to begin with is that there are profound differences within the country that only a federalist structure can accommodate. In Canada, an international leader in e-government and service delivery, federalism has allowed for the successful integration of French-speaking Canadians in the Quebec province into greater Canada (although that process has not been without tension.) The problem federalism presents for service delivery is clear. As Jeffrey Roy and John Langford have written: "Integrating the delivery of services to citizens and businesses across federal and provincial governments is far more challenging than integrating within each level of government, because the Canadian public sector is a political federation that grants sovereignty to both the federal government as well as the 10 provinces."[1]

In the United States, the diversity of state approaches to policy started out as a necessity and has come to be seen as a virtue. In 1932, Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis popularized this concept in a dissenting opinion when he wrote: "It is one of the happy incidents of the federal system that a single courageous State may, if its citizens choose, serve as a laboratory; and try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the country."

In a robust federalist system, there are many instances where policy differs significantly from state to state and from the federal government, making the integration of services virtually impossible. Let's start with taxes. One of the most widely held goals in service delivery would be to reduce the citizen's tax filing burden down to a single postcard by integrating state, local, and federal tax filing into one painless transaction. When this was first proposed by the National Performance Review in a 1997 publication, "Access America," the technological problems seemed immense.

Major differences between the states and the federal government exist in other areas as well. In the Medicaid program, significant variations exist across states in terms of who is eligible for Medicaid. Federal law divides eligibility into mandatory eligibility groups and optional eligibility groups and states get to choose who they cover above a certain minimum. The result is that often the best the federal government can do through its websites is to move the interested applicant on to a state website or to the website of another federal program. Federalism runs counter to the No Wrong Door approach.

Even within the federal government there is a dizzying array of qualifications for programs. Thus, for instance, while the U.S. government's Benefits.gov is a handy way to uncover federal programs that might apply to someone (after they have gone through an exhaustive questionnaire), the best it can do is unearth yet another website for the potential applicant to visit.

For some target populations, such as mobile military families, the challenges are even greater. As military families with special needs children, or who require community support for social services, move from state to state, the variation in the state and local delivery systems—from re-registering and re-qualifying for mental health programs, or special education programs, or even simply how to find the local food bank—become very daunting. Having a No Wrong Door or one-stop shop for this population would be difficult to build, but have an enormous impact on simplifying their lives.

Another area where service delivery is far from No Wrong Door is the adoption of children. Adoption policy is set by states and the result is that today more than 100,000 children in foster care are waiting for permanent parents, in large part because barriers in the adoption system keep parents willing to adopt children with special needs from finding those children across state lines. Among the many problems is that home studies of parents seeking to adopt children differ from state to state. This is one of many hurdles that work against the possibility of matching parents who are willing to adopt a child with special needs in one state with a child who happens to live in another state. Adoption of special-needs children should be a

1. Jeffrey Roy and John Langford, *Integrating Service Delivery Across Levels of Government: Case Studies of Canada and Other Countries,* IBM Center for The Business of Government, 2008.

promising area for No Wrong Door architecture, but before that can happen a variety of state incentive structures need to be changed.[2]

In large and diverse countries such as the United States, the forces in favor of more state and local control and away from federal control are powerful. Gun laws, for instance, vary from state to state and these states and localities remain extremely polarized in their attitudes toward gun control. Immigration, an issue that has always been the exclusive responsibility of the federal government, has come under challenge in recent years as states and localities as diverse as Arizona and Hazleton, Pennsylvania, have challenged federal preeminence in this area. While they have not been successful in the courts, their challenge to federal supremacy in this area is indicative of the passions surrounding the issue at the state and local level.

Conclusion

While federalism can help with service integration through the creation of collaborative networks of state and local officials, federalism's most important contribution to governance is on issues where passions run high and where opinion differs significantly from state to state or locality to locality. Thus one of the virtues of a federalist system is that it allows for diversity of opinion on highly controversial hot-button issues. This is especially important at this point in history when the United States is going through a particularly strong period of polarization on many issues and federalism is a valuable structure for allowing differences within the whole. The advantages that a national government brings in terms of its ability to promote best practices and lead in service integration are countered by the importance of a federal structure that allows states to have fundamentally different policies from each other and from the federal government.

Thus in certain policy areas, federalism limits opportunities for greater service integration. But this should not doom the conversation. There are policy areas where a national consensus must be achieved before service integration can be contemplated. Nonetheless, there are major areas of federal-state policy consensus which would allow some degree of conformity in the service delivery systems between the two. Tax filing might be a place where an experiment could be conducted for certain segments of the taxpaying public (most likely those who file the EZ form) to test the limits of greater integration, which would also simplify and speed services for tax filers.

The goal of greater integration of, access to, and delivery of federal, state, and local services is no less achievable than the goal of increased online service transactions was a decade ago. As long as we understand that federalism presents some legitimate barriers to integration and as long as we get that conversation right, we can move toward the goal of creating a No Wrong Door approach to integrated government services for Americans.

Elaine C. Kamarck *is a senior fellow in the Governance Studies program at Brookings and the Director of the Management and Leadership Initiative at Brookings, on leave from the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. As a senior staffer in the White House, she created the National Performance Review.*

2. For more information on this see: Elaine C. Kamarck, Julie Boatright Wilson, Mary Eschelback Hansen, and Jeff Katz, "Eliminating Barriers to the Adoption of Children in Foster Care," Harvard Kennedy School White Paper, January 10, 2012. Accessed at: http://www.hks.harvard.edu/var/ezp_site/storage/fckeditor/file/pdfs/centers-programs/centers/wiener/wps/No_Adoption_Barriers_White_Paper_6_12_Final.pdf