
Creating the Front Door to Government: A Case Study of the *Firstgov* Portal

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ABSTRACT

FIRSTGOV IS THE U.S. FEDERAL PORTAL to government information and services. It was conceived by the Clinton administration in June of 2000 and launched in September 2000. A case study of the development of *Firstgov* indicated that top-level leadership, a small and committed project team, and the very condensed timeframe of the project were factors that contributed to the success of the portal. Another reason cited for the success of the *Firstgov* development was the U.S. federal information policy environment, a robust and evolving framework creating the climate for electronic government. An unusual feature of the project development was the donation of the Inktomi search engine for three years, an event that further enabled *Firstgov* to open its door on time and on budget. The portal continues today with funding and resources designed to ensure its future.

INTRODUCTION

The creation of the *FirstGov* federal Web portal represents a dramatic new way of doing business for government. The portal itself represents a major change in how the government will interact with its customers—citizens, businesses, and other governments. The longstanding oxymoron, “technical innovation in government,” has been challenged with the development of *FirstGov*. This application, created during the Clinton administration, has paved the way for the e-government strategy of the Bush administration. The goal is for *FirstGov* to serve as the gateway to all U.S. government information. It provides the most comprehensive search of

government documents and services anywhere on the Internet. The creation of this portal was informed by policy designed to create an electronic government. It was forged by a unique partnership between the public and private sectors, which enabled it to be up and running in ninety days—a major feat for government. The story of this development was captured in a case study funded by the National Science Foundation under the Digital Government program.

THE U.S. FEDERAL GOVERNMENT INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Policy is a critical tool for framing the operational environment for government (Dawes et al., 1999; Fletcher & Westerback, 1999). Policy related to information and the management of information resources has had a defining influence on the evolution from a paper-based, to a computer-based, to an electronic government in the United States. When viewed from the perspective that the U.S. federal government is the world's largest creator, disseminator, and user of information, the criticality of having a strong policy framework is obvious. Harlan Cleveland (1986) asserted that "government is information." The importance and value of information to government mandates a high level of attention to ensure that it will be utilized for the public good. This policy framework serves to highlight and unify information issues such as management, planning, privacy, security, access, property rights, and electronic commerce.

POLICY CREATING AN ELECTRONIC GOVERNMENT

The Government Paperwork Elimination Act (GPEA) (P.L. 105-277), signed into law October 21, 1998, represented the Clinton administration's intent to move quickly to a federal government that offered comprehensive electronic access and services. GPEA was a major legislative endorsement of electronic government. It required the federal executive agencies, no later than October 21, 2003, to allow individuals and businesses that interact with federal agencies the opportunity to do so electronically. GPEA more importantly mandated that electronic records and their electronic signatures were to have the full force of legal effect and validity. It encouraged federal agencies to promote an electronic information-management environment more akin to electronic commerce models, including electronic transactions, recordkeeping, filing, maintenance, submission, and archiving. This opened up a wide array of possible types of electronic information interactions between government and the public. The submission of bids and proposals for government contracts; applications for licenses, loans, and benefits; requests for government records; receipt of benefits such as social security; online procurement; and citizen interaction in legislation are but a few examples of the new applications for which GPEA created the policy environment.

The high-level management policy environment for electronic government is set forth in S.803, the E-Government Act of 2001, introduced by Senator Joseph Lieberman (D-CT). While it was not successful in 2001, an amended version of the act was reintroduced and reported out of committee on March 21, 2002. With strong congressional support, this bill was passed by the Senate on November 15, 2002, mere hours after the House had approved the measure. The amended version of the E-Government Act (P.L. 107-30) sets up a broad policy framework for an electronic government strategy that will enable citizens to access their government information and services electronically, over the Internet. The act recognizes the effect the Internet has already had on U.S. society and seeks to avail both government and citizens of the benefits already being realized by businesses and individual Internet users. The act further includes the creation of a federal chief information officer (CIO) housed in the Executive Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the establishment of an Office of Electronic Government housed in OMB. The federal chief information officer is to be appointed by the president with the advice and consent of the Senate. The creation of an Office of Electronic Government is to ensure that electronic initiatives are sound investments and, more importantly, that these new e-government initiatives are cross-agency in nature. This is a serious effort to dismantle the unwieldy "stovepipe" structure that is predominant today across government. Cross-agency initiatives are seen as reducing the information burden on the public, while making access simplified, universal, and not time limited.

A critical aspect of the act is funding. It appropriates \$45 million for funding of electronic government initiatives in the current fiscal year (Executive Office of the President, 2003). In subsequent years, the Office of Electronic Government will have a total of \$345 million to be expended over five years. This is a needed shot-in-the-arm for electronic government development, which had been appropriated a mere \$5 million for fiscal year 2002. Some of the funds will go to improvements on the *FirstGov* portal. The development of a subject-based taxonomy for users is a vital component of the changes envisioned for *FirstGov*. This will move the portal, and the federal government, away from the current agency-based locus of information.

There are many other laws that frame the electronic government environment. The development of an information resources management environment has been a slow and deliberate process in federal government, and it created the framework for an electronic government to flourish. The Commission on Federal Paperwork, created under the Ford administration, was the bellwether for the development of many of the following laws related to the electronic management of information. Some of the key laws that have enabled an electronic government to evolve are the following:

- The Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 (44 U.S.C. chapter 35);
- The Clinger-Cohen Act of 1996 (40 U.S.C. 1401(3));
- The Government Information Security Reform Act of 2000 (P.L. 106–398);
- The Computer Security Act of 1987, as amended (P.L. 100–235, 15 U.S.C.);
- The Privacy Act of 1974 (5 U.S.C. 552a);
- The Computer Matching and Privacy Protection Act of 1988 (P.L. 100–503); and
- The Telecommunications Act of 1996 (P.L. 104–104).

Another defining policy statement in support of electronic government was set out in the *President's Management Agenda* of 2001. The Bush administration developed five government-wide goals for its tenure, one of which is the expansion of an electronic federal government. Thus, the imprimatur for continuing evolution of an electronic government was set. A high-level task force was created from an July 18, 2001, memo (OMB-01–28) which called for the task force, informally named “quicksilver,” to develop the priority strategic actions needed to enable electronic government. The group was in service by August of 2001, and it quickly set out an ambitious agenda for electronic government. This agenda was reported to the President's Management Council on October 3, 2001—truly Internet speed! The initial electronic government agenda was further refined and formalized in the February 27, 2002, release of the *E-Government Strategy* (Executive Office of the President, 2002). This strategy created a vision that is citizen centered, results oriented, and market based in nature. It mandates cross-agency sharing of data to simplify access to government and to reduce information resources expenses across government agencies. The strategy focuses on four groups of end-users—government-to-citizen, government-to-business, government-to-government, and intragovernmental—to improve internal efficiency and accountability of federal agencies. An initial thirty-four projects were singled out for the first round of funding, with completion dates scheduled no later than eighteen to twenty-four months. All approved projects represented cross-agency applications. The haste to get them online is a further measure of the importance of electronic government to the administration's overall policy.

POLICY CREATING THE *FIRSTGOV* PORTAL

The use of the *FirstGov* portal as an anchor for these more agency- or service-based applications is a key component of the electronic government strategy outlined above. The portal both complements and enables the information policy framework of the federal government. *Firstgov* is seen today as a key player in the continued management and development of the e-government initiatives. The Clinton administration's strong support

of the use of information technology in government set the stage for the eventual adoption of a portal model of Internet use. Clinton, in the instantiation of the National Performance Review (later renamed the National Partnership for Reinventing Government¹) created an Internet-enabled environment for government early on in his first term of office. Through the adoption of increasingly sophisticated information technology, the federal government was poised to utilize the Internet in its daily practice.

The December 17, 1999, presidential memo on “Electronic Government” was the first policy-level indication that the then Clinton administration wanted to create a “one-stop” access point for government information and services. This commitment was reaffirmed in the first presidential Internet address on June 24, 2000. In his address, President Clinton stated that a government portal for information and services was to be open for business within ninety days of the Internet address, thus giving the policy not only “teeth” but also a major challenge. It was clear that Clinton saw *FirstGov* as a legacy he wanted to leave the American public when he stepped down from office in January of 2001. The above detailed laws—coupled with the strong presidential support and direction—created a policy environment that was predisposed to the successful development of a federal information and service portal.

THE CASE STUDY

A case study approach to understanding the *FirstGov* implementation was seen as providing the richest data. This project was the first of its kind in the federal government and spanned both public and private sectors in a new model of partnership. By approaching *FirstGov* as a case, we were able to investigate six dimensions of a preliminary conceptual model of electronic government collaborative developments. The dimensions included in the model are:

- Political, social, economic, and cultural environment;
- Institutional, services sector, and technological environment;
- Characteristics and objectives of public and private partners;
- The collaboration process;
- The collaboration methods; and
- Performance.²

The case study interviews were conducted by a team of researchers at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, in the summer of 2001. We interviewed the key participants in the development of the portal—both public and private sector partners and stakeholders. The enabling policies were analyzed, along with any relevant documentation on the project compiled by the *FirstGov* team. The testimonies from the House Subcommittee on Government Management, Information, and Technology hearing on

FirstGov (October 2, 2000) were part of the documentation analyzed for the case. The development process for *FirstGov* received considerable attention by the federal information community press as well, and relevant articles from magazines such as *Federal Computer Week* and *Government Computer News* were scanned on a regular basis for stories about the project. Data were coded based on a scheme developed and pretested by the research team at the Center for Technology in Government at SUNY Albany.

THE CREATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF *FIRSTGOV*

FirstGov was launched September 22, 2000, with an initial size of 47 million U.S. federal government Web pages. *FirstGov*, the only official U.S. government Web portal, is described as a single, trusted point-of-service for U.S. citizens and businesses to gain entry to federal services and information resources. The initial vision for *FirstGov* was to be a high-speed, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, user-friendly entry point to every online resource, be it information, data, or service, offered by the federal government of the United States. *Firstgov* was also envisioned as the vehicle to reduce government bureaucracy substantively, create a more responsive and customer-focused government, and enable new and more active citizen participation in democratic processes.

FirstGov serves as an example of a unique public-private partnership to provide electronic government services and information to the public. This project represented an entirely new venture for the U.S. federal government. It was created to cut across agency and departmental stovepipes and to centralize the location for retrieval of government information and services, with government agencies traditionally being averse to either activity. While a number of portal-type applications were developed under the National Performance Review (e.g., <http://www.students.gov>, <http://www.seniors.gov>, and <http://www.workers.gov>), *FirstGov* represented a project on a much larger scale, with its scope being the entire federal government.

To provide ongoing direction to the project, the President's Management Council (PMC) established a *FirstGov.gov* Board of Directors, which consisted of eight members from the PMC and three members of the Federal Chief Information Officers (CIO) Council. The board was charged with responsibility for coordinating project issues across the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. The daily development and management of the portal were turned over to the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), which staffed a *FirstGov* project team to lead the effort. This team, in turn, managed a \$4 million, two-year contract to create, operate, and maintain the Web site. The GSA was a key partner in the development process. It provided the wherewithal, the organizational resources, and a good number of the people to work on *FirstGov*. The *FirstGov* team was created as a collateral model of the

organization, one that used the resources of the larger agency but worked outside standard operating procedures as needed. Thus, team expertise and enthusiasm were not hampered by the red tape of bureaucracy. The then CIO at the GSA was credited with being a driving force behind the project's success. He was referred to as an advocate, a proselytizer, and a very visible champion for *FirstGov* throughout its development and implementation.

The above-mentioned contract did not cover services such as redesigning the Web site or changing its hosted location. It also did not cover the development or use of an electronic search function—a critical aspect of this project. That search function was offered free of charge for an initial three-year period by the Federal Search Foundation (Fed-Search). Fed-Search was the nonprofit corporation developed by Dr. Eric Brewer, cofounder and chief scientist for the Inktomi Corporation, to channel the donated search engine to *FirstGov*. In setting up this corporation, Dr. Brewer also envisioned that it would attract other private sector partners who would be eager to donate some technology component or service to this innovative and potentially profitable project. A memorandum of understanding with the GSA, on behalf of the PMC and the FirstGov.gov Board, and Dr. Brewer cemented this generous donation of a world-class search engine. It was believed by members of the project team that this donation was one of the key critical elements that enabled the project to be completed on time. It is interesting to note here that this same donation was the cause of considerable angst in the software industry, which feared that, when the three-year donation period was over, Inktomi would have an unfair competitive advantage over other potential vendors vying for the contract.

The Federal CIO Council was also a partner in the project. It was used as a source of knowledge and expertise on government agencies and information technology. The agency CIOs were also coopted to be change agents to convince agency personnel of the necessity of being a part of *FirstGov* and not a protagonist. Thus, the CIOs were able to provide support for the cross-agency approach to information presentation and dissemination—a vital characteristic of the *FirstGov* portal. The Federal CIO Council also assisted the project by providing some funding for the first-year development and maintenance of the portal. They literally passed the hat among twenty-two federal agencies to keep the project alive.

Everyone involved in the development and implementation of *FirstGov* expressed a sense of dedication to and belief in what they were doing. The sense of importance, high-level commitment, and urgency was transmitted through all the partners, who pulled together to make the project a success. This was not a typical government project, mired in procurement and acquisition regulations and constrained by the federal budget, although it was noted repeatedly that the small initial budget was a hin-

drance to the development team. The *FirstGov* project was much more like that of a start-up “dot-com” fueled by the energy and engagement of its members and their belief in the project’s goals and objectives.

Another important motivator for the partners was that *FirstGov* was seen as a necessary and important public service. The strong information policies of the federal government focused on information creation, dissemination, and records management and archiving. The development of a government-wide portal was but one step in the move to an electronic government—a government that would facilitate the access and dissemination of information.

CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS FOR THE PROJECT

Leadership was from the very top, the president of the United States. Clinton was a champion for using information technology to enable better, smarter, faster government services and information dissemination. The top-level attention from the Executive Office of the President was one of the critical success factors that enabled the portal to be “open for business” in such an unprecedented amount of time—ninety days. The criticality of such top-level support has long been addressed in the research literature (Kraemer & King, 1977; Fletcher et al., 1992; Norris & Kraemer, 1994; Norris & Kraemer, 1996; Fletcher, Holden, & Norris, 2001). The pervasive impact of this variable and its effect on the success of such a monumental information technology project was well demonstrated by the *FirstGov* project.

The management of the project, in the hands of the U.S. General Services Administration, was a facilitating factor in the project’s perceived success. The GSA team members were tirelessly dedicated to the project because “they knew it was right.” And many saw the small size of the team as a success factor. The size enabled it to be fast and flexible. All of the people interviewed credited the following as well to the successful launch of *FirstGov*:

- The president’s memo of December 17, 1999, on “Electronic Government”;
- The passage of the Government Paperwork Elimination Act in 1998;
- The donation of the Inktomi search engine for a three-year period;
- The small size of the project team; and
- The compressed time frame—ninety days—in which to develop and implement *FirstGov*.

These factors created the necessary top-level support, the policy framework, and the sense of commitment and urgency to have a successful project. A general theme heard echoed among the respondents was that *FirstGov* was successful because of personality, commitment, and a good

team. While many of the noted critical success factors come as no surprise, the fact that the very brief development schedule was seen as positive represented something new for the federal government. Unlike most information technology projects in government, where procurement and acquisition law often contribute to lengthy, drawn-out, and costly information technology developments, *FirstGov* was not subject to many of these instances of red tape. The requirement of a ninety-day project development meant that, to be successful, the team had to creatively, while legally, procure the necessary technology to launch the portal on time. This created a sense of urgency that spurred the team to exceed their performance expectations.

The critical success factors sum up the components of the partnership and the development activities well. There was a policy environment in place that was conducive to creating an electronic government portal. There was presidential support and a committed project team. The donation of a search engine significantly cut down the time and expense needed to assess and procure or create a search engine with the necessary capabilities for the portal. This was a very visible, high-impact project, and there was considerable scrutiny from stakeholders and from the press. These pressures served to motivate the team to work harder and faster than many anticipated. *Firstgov* was launched on time and on budget to visible fanfare.

ASSESSMENT OF THE PORTAL

The *FirstGov* initiative was seen by many as transformational to the conduct of government. It has received numerous awards since the portal went live in 2000. It has also been embraced by the Bush administration, with Vice President Cheney launching the redesigned portal in February of 2002. Among the awards it has been given are:

- *Yahoo! Internet Life* magazine's Fifty Most Incredibly Useful Sites, July 2002;
- Pioneer Award, E-Gov 2002, June 2002, and April 2001;
- Industry Advisory Council, E-Gov, and the Federal Chief Information Officer Council's Excellence.Gov Award Finalist, January 2002;
- *Government Executive* magazine's 2001 Grace Hopper Government Technology Leadership Award, December 2001;
- 2001 Innovations in American Government Award Finalist, August 2001 and Semifinalist, April 2001;
- Federation of Government Information Processing Council's Intergovernmental Solutions Award, June 2001;
- 2001–2002 Golden Web Award, May 2001;
- Azimuth Award for supporting federal information technology went to Dave Barram, former GSA administrator, and Eric Brewer, for their part in *FirstGov*.gov, March 2001;

- FOSE and Chief Information Officers Council of Excellence Award, March 2001;
- Vice President's Hammer Award for Reinventing Government, January 2001. (Awards and recognition of *FirstGov*, n.d.)

Today (December 2002), there are more than 51 million Web pages at *FirstGov* from more than 2,000 Web sites, not only from the federal government but also from the District of Columbia, state governments, and the U.S. territories. Pages accessible on *FirstGov* are, by-and-large, not available on other commercial Web sites. The redesigned Web site is arranged by three gateways: citizen, business, and government. It is informational and transactional, enabling users to conduct business with government via the Internet. Transactions are available for citizen-to-government, business-to-government, and government-to-government processes. You can find and apply for government jobs, electronically pay an employee's child support obligation, electronically file for patent and trademarks, purchase government supplies, apply for federally guaranteed student loans, buy stamps, change your address, and a whole host of other activities that used to require bricks-and-mortar, paper-and-pencils. This is the twenty-four-hour access and convenience that was the goal of *FirstGov* when it went online.

In a study conducted by Stowers (2002), the author noted that the design and content of the site were both well thought-out and effective for the end user. Stowers described *FirstGov* as "strongly citizen focused" and gave high marks to its portfolio-type user gateways. The portal meets one of the most important criteria that users ask for in a government Web site—the ability to communicate with elected officials (Matthews, 2002), which is in line with Stowers's assessment above that *FirstGov* has a strong citizen orientation.

Firstgov has done some of its own soul-searching as well. In a survey administered to gauge customer satisfaction (May 2002) first-time users of the portal indicated that they were much more likely to revisit *FirstGov* than they had been prior to its February 2002 redesign. This was the most significant finding of the survey. Return users to the portal noted that it was easier to find information and that they more often now recommended *FirstGov* to others as a search engine.

Of course, as with anything done by the government, not all reviews of *FirstGov* have been favorable. The portal has been criticized as not accessible to end-users, little more than a table of contents to government, not meeting many project deadlines and, most recently and visibly, it has received much adverse publicity for awarding the new search engine contract to a Norwegian company. This award was greeted with dismay and outright antagonism, as many felt the search engine for the premier U.S. government Web site should be a U.S. company. However, *FirstGov* has

gone ahead with this award and Fast Search and Transfer will provide the search services for the next five years at a projected cost of \$1.85 million a year (*Federal Computer Week*, 2002). The selection of the Oslo-based company did, however, dispel the fear of many in the software industry that Inktomi, with its initial donation of the *FirstGov* search engine, had an unfair competitive advantage. While Inktomi bid for the new procurement, it was not chosen.

Probably one of the most cogent comments that can be made about *FirstGov* at this time is that it is a work in progress, as are all government Web sites today. With the completion of the \$350,000 site redesign, and the \$85,000 contract to UserWorks to test the usability of the site extensively, *FirstGov* appears to be ready to learn from its past. The newly reorganized operating structure for the *FirstGov* staff is another indication that the administration is supporting major changes in operating procedures to better offer information and service access through this portal. The General Services Administration has reorganized the *FirstGov* office into a consolidated customer-focused unit—the Office of Citizen Services and Communications. *Firstgov* is an integral part of this new office, enabling the GSA to act as a front door to the services and information sought by U.S. citizens. In support of this focus, the GSA has designated their e-government activities as one of their three 2003 budget themes, thus providing the needed resources. The president's e-government strategy, with its recent funding of twenty-four new cross-agency initiatives, also lends considerable support to the future of *FirstGov*. The portal is to be a major player in the development and implementation of the e-government strategy. It has also been awarded a portion of OMB's innovative e-government projects fund (*Federal Computer Week*, 2002), with a focus on e-authentication and content management of the portal. *Firstgov* will also receive a significant portion of the fiscal year 2003 information technology budget, set at \$52 billion.

The recently enacted E-government Act of 2002 also creates a rosy future for *FirstGov*. The act sets aside a fund of \$345 million to be administered by the GSA over the next four years in support of e-government projects. As noted above, the oversight of *FirstGov* is in the GSA, a fortuitous location for the e-government portal. Thus, the future for this portal is bright. The top-level support for electronic government has carried over from the Clinton to the Bush administration. The policy environment supports its continued development and maintenance. The American public is online and taking advantage of government Web sites. A recent report from the Council for Excellence in Government (Hart-Teeter, 2002) indicated that 76 percent of all Internet users and 51 percent of Americans have accessed a government Web site. It also noted that, overall, Americans are more positive in their outlook toward electronic government than they were in the previous year, and that they had high expectations for government as it went online. Government Web sites that duplicate the ease

and usability of the “dot-coms” are expected, and *FirstGov*, with its redesign and its responses to user surveys, is well aware of this expectation. Further, *FirstGov* has won numerous awards over the past three years and has strong visibility and usage. It is poised to play a critical role in both the implementation of the *President’s Management Agenda* and the electronic government initiatives funded in the 2003 budget of the United States. The 2003 budget recognizes that the U.S. government will mix its use of Internet and physical assets to become a “click and mortar” enterprise. The agencies that serve citizens, businesses, internal federal government functions, and intergovernmental needs will thus become more accessible, effective, and efficient. In adopting a “click and mortar” model, the federal government will use the best practices of industry. The Bush administration’s goal is that services and information sought by citizens will rarely be more than three clicks away from end users.

CONCLUSION

A final thought here has to do with the imperative of access to government information. This principle has been the drive behind information policy and management in federal government. But it is hindered by the perpetual inefficiencies of data redundancy, data duplication, and data error that abound in government information systems. The creation of *FirstGov* does not remediate these age-old problems with access to data. It does not mean that all government information will reside in one format, in one location. Rather, *FirstGov* makes use of existing federal agency databases for its content. It is no secret that these agency Web sites are often less than optimal (McClure, Sprehe, & Eschenfelder, 2001). Federal agency Web site development began with the agencies putting their paper products online and is only now slowly moving toward a reengineering orientation for the online environment. Thus, in many instances, we are receiving the electronic version of our paper government rather than seeing government reengineered for an electronic environment and citizenry.

There are further complications and complexities when we add into this mix the state and local government Web sites. All U.S. state governments have Web sites, many of these being all-inclusive gateways to state government. One need only go to North Star, the official home of Minnesota government (<http://www.state.mn.us/>) or AccessWashington (<http://access.wa.gov/>) to see innovative and diverse approaches to online information access and service delivery. Cities such as New York and Chicago are also making use of the portal concept, offering a “mygov.gov” approach for their users. In respect to the diffusion curve, the state and local governments appear to be in the lead, and *FirstGov* can take some lessons learned and best practices from these innovative and citizen-centric applications.

An additional complexity in creating an all-inclusive U.S. government portal is that state and local governments operate under different

information-management policies and environments when it comes to public records, privacy, security, and infrastructure concerns. There are many important questions to be thought through and problems to be resolved as we move forward in our electronic world. Access and usability need to be kept in the forefront of development goals—maybe not always compatible with state and local needs, but essential to the success of *FirstGov*. Our portal to electronic government has been constructed—what remains to be seen is how it will develop into our front door to government.

NOTES

1. For a more robust description and assessment of the information policy environment that framed the National Performance Review, see Fletcher & Westerback (1999).
2. A detailed explanation of the model and the major research results can be found at http://www.cefr.io.qc.ca/english/activities_symp.cfm, from an International Conference on Public-Private Partnerships for Improved Government Performance, October 24–25, 2002, Quebec City, Canada.

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