

# E-government: The next revolution

BY JACK J. GALLT

**A** revolution is under way that will forever change the face of government. Like the one that created this nation more than 200 years ago, the information technology revolution is about changing the way we are governed and how we communicate and interact with the institution of government.

The explosive growth of the Internet in the last five years has forced government at all levels to become more open, responsive and efficient. People now demand immediate access to information and expect to be able to conduct their business where and when it is most convenient.

Some observers have suggested that the emerging electronic marketplace will require a restructuring of relations between cities, states and the federal government. Others have taken a slightly less dramatic view and predict that the Internet of the 21st century will not only be a global electronic marketplace, but also will become the new "town square" for public discussion and debate over the critical issues of the day.

The term "e-commerce" quickly has become part of everyday vocabulary and is used interchangeably with "e-government" to describe the transformation that is occurring in government service delivery. Electronic commerce typically describes business transactions that are conducted electronically, or online, via the Internet. The most common examples include applying for permits and licenses and paying taxes. Electronic government, on the other hand, represents the broader use of technology to streamline government operations and improve services.

The emergence of the "digital state" is the focus of an ongoing study being conducted by The Center for Digital Government, based in Sacramento, Calif., and the Progress and Freedom Foundation, based in Washington, D.C. The study is designed to gauge how well states are using information technology to improve their operations and better serve taxpayers.

Two states received the highest marks from the study's first phase, which looked at electronic citizen-to-government and business-to-government transactions. Georgia received top honors for e-commerce and Kansas for e-taxation customer ease. Both states were recognized for creating highly functional, easy-to-use Web sites that allow people and businesses to conduct transactions "online instead of in line." The success of these and other top-rated states can be traced to early leadership and vision. In many cases, states used the year 2000 bug as an opportunity to mod-

ernize, rather than simply repair, potential system defects.

All 50 states now have Web sites that provide basic information about their state, agencies and services. Many have spent significant resources promoting tourism and economic development in the hope of luring potential visitors and businesses to the state. Fewer states have made the transition to a fully integrated, Web-based service delivery mechanism. The good news is that with the year 2000 issue behind them, states now can devote even more of their information technology resources to developing e-government applications.

Future phases of the digital state study will look at how states are using information technology in law enforcement, health and social services, digital democracy, management and administration, and education.

A parallel initiative is under way to help states address issues of organization, governance and leadership that are associated with the e-government revolution. The creation of the National Electronic Commerce Coordinating Council — an alliance of national state government organizations dedi-

cated to the advancement of electronic commerce within states — has provided a vehicle for state officials to study this issue and share information on best practices.

In addition to sponsoring an annual conference on electronic commerce in the states, the NECCC recently released a draft blueprint for state electronic commerce activities intended to provoke thought and discussion about major areas of policy, administration and infrastructure. The document addresses such issues as access, privacy, security, economic development, standards, leadership and governance, funding, and personnel and training.

The NECCC recommends using an enterprise approach to governance that includes establishing policies on various issues. Similarly, governments could fund electronic commerce initiatives by partnering with the private sector, which would pay for the installation, operation and maintenance of the system. Residents and businesses would pay transaction fees for services provided.

As states move into the era of e-government, they find themselves in a period of tremendous opportunity and great challenge. Attention to customer needs and an enterprise-wide view of the operation are critical. Success will hinge on how effectively states apply information technology and human resources to support this new business model. A revolution depends on it.



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*Jack J. Gallt is the director of the CSG Center for State Administration and Technology.*