

Legislative information technology

BY KEON S. CHI

The Internet has drastically changed state legislative operations and information systems. Every state legislature now has a colorful Web site with all sorts of information about the workings of the lawmaking body. In most states, legislative information is available not only to legislators and staff, but also state officials in the other branches, lobbyists and the public. Moreover, legislators in many states use computers on the floor, thus creating new dimensions in the legislative process.

These developments open the door to questions about the effect of legislative information technology. Key questions include: Does legislative information technology help or hinder legislative effectiveness and efficiency? What new policies or measures might be needed to strengthen the legislative branch in an era of rapidly changing information technology?

Digitized legislative information. As recently as 1985, only 11 state legislatures offered online access to legislative information systems to the public. Today, virtually every state legislature makes legislative information available to the public.

The scope of information available has expanded steadily over the years. In most states, digitized legislative information includes: administrative rules, bill status, bill text, resolution status, legislative analysis, committee meeting schedules and notices, committee reports, legislative calendars, legislative journals, legislative rules and procedures, legislative reports and voting records. In addition, many legislative Web sites now provide links to other states' Web sites, policy organizations, interest groups and federal agencies.

Computers in legislative chambers. Since the Florida House of Representatives provided legislators with computers in 1991, many states followed suit. Currently, 29 states make personal computers available in legislative chambers. Although each state's use of computers on the floor differs, the main purposes of providing laptops and other types of PCs in legislative chambers are to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the legislative process and have a more open legislative environment.

State legislators might want to consider results of having computers on the floor. For example, do legislators make more informed and better decisions now than before? Are they more familiar now with the texts of bills

and resolutions introduced, engrossed and enrolled? Have personal computers in legislative chambers affected the number of bills introduced or passed? What impact have such computers had on legislator-lobbyist interactions? What about public inputs via e-mail during the legislative sessions? In addition, they might consider if there is a "digital divide" between legislators who use computers and legislators who don't.

Improving legislative efficiency. In addition to improving the effectiveness of the legislative process, legislative leaders should be concerned about the efficiency and cost-benefits of using digitized legislative information systems, keeping in mind that technology is a tool.

Pertinent questions include: Has the legislature reduced or increased paperwork as a result? Has the legislature downsized staff as a result of adopting technology? Or, are more legislative assistants and qualified technology specialists needed now?

Constituent services. In addition to its effectiveness and efficiency, state legislators

might want to examine the effect of information technology on constituent services. Many state legislators maintain personal Web pages with information on legislative initiatives and e-mail addresses. Technology allows legislators to communicate directly with voters, rather than relying on the media or traditional mailings.

Legislators now differ in how they handle constituents who communicate by e-mail. There are questions about receiving e-mails in the legislative chamber while debate and voting take place, allowing access to debates and voting live on computers and handling such outside "disruptions" to the legislative process.

These are some of the issues relevant to the use of technology in the state legislative process. The main question, however, is not whether more technology should or should not be used in the legislative process, but how to use it, keeping in mind that we live in a new era of electronic government and electronic democracy. Therefore, state legislators might want to adopt new policies and regulations on the appropriate use of technology.

As former U.S. senator and vice president Humbert Humphrey once said, "Never underestimate the power of a computer. History's most profound revolutions have been underestimated by their contemporaries."



It's time to consider how to better use technology in the legislative process.

Keon S. Chi is a senior fellow in CSG's Center for Leadership, Innovation and Policy.