

Taking the "road show" online

by Brad Latta

Structured, e-consultations involve citizens with government

E-consultation. Sounds interesting and very e-like. But what is it really?

"E-consultation provides an opportunity to present new options to a discussion that might never otherwise be presented," says Joe Peters of Systemscope Inc., an Ottawa-based management consulting firm. According to Peters, it involves interacting with stakeholders over the Internet, getting people involved, providing them with a foundation of information; promoting thoughtful consideration of issues and options; and, building on and creating new relationships.

"It will change the way Parliamentary Committees interact with Canadians," says Peters. Peters should know. Systemscope is an e-consultation leader in Canada. Currently, it is providing services to the Canada Pension Plan Sub-Committee on the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

However, despite accolades like this, most people don't really understand e-consultation. Worse, others who claim they do, don't. Some will even tell you, innocently, that they're using e-consultation, when they're not. They're surprised to learn that simply operating a website that makes mountains of information available to the public, everything from public meetings to the most obscure of reports, doesn't qualify. There's no consultation in that.



Joe Peters, Systemscope Inc.

But governments and businesses are getting closer to the mark. The City of Indianapolis, Indiana, is a case in point. Visit their award-winning website – www.indygov.org – and you'll find a good example of e-government at work, with a touch of e-consultation. While there's lots of information being offered and numerous services are being delivered online, there are also real opportunities for citizens to participate in discussions on local issues and influence their resolution.

For example, when the city's old Market Square Arena was replaced by a new facility, e-consultation played an important role in determining the future use of the property the arena occupied in Indianapolis' downtown core. In the end, the arena was demolished – imploded actually. The land now awaits future development according to a carefully crafted, multi-use plan that benefited from maximum community input, both by traditional means and through e-consultation.

Today, Indianapolis is using e-consultation to study a light rail plan and to conduct *One Book, One City* – a project designed to unite the community around reading and discussing one book. "It's a very positive thing," says Melina Kennedy, the city's director of Economic Development, commenting on using the Internet to consult citizens. "We want to hear from more people and this allows us to do it."

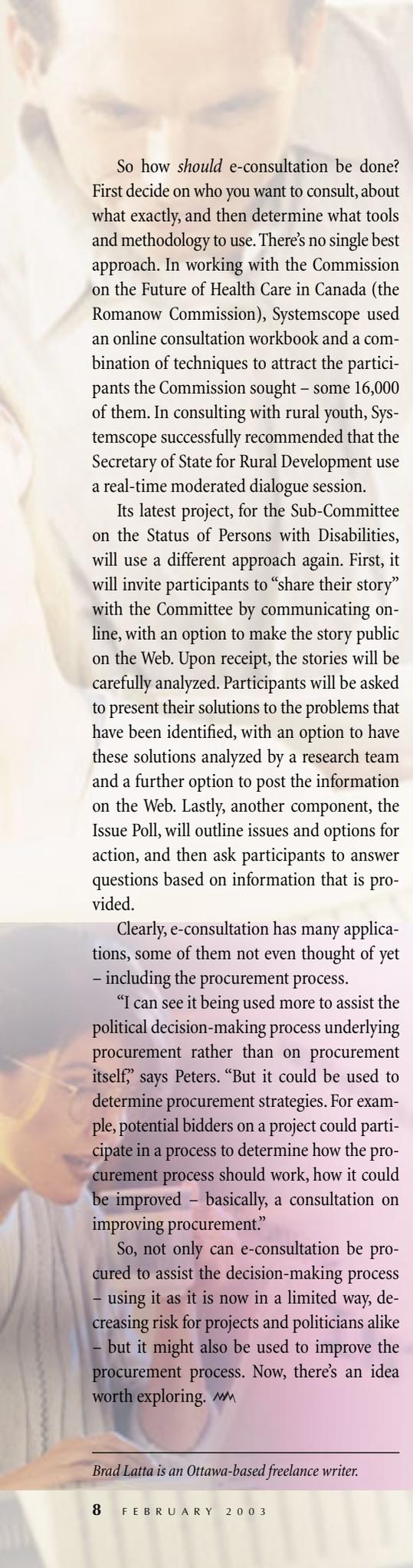
Of course, Canadian cities are also walking the e-government trail and along the way flirting with e-consultation. In Ottawa,

the recently amalgamated new city held three town hall meetings last spring in which people participated online in discussing how Ottawa should grow. As well, Ottawa used the Internet to conduct a wide-ranging survey on topics crucial to the community's growth, and continues to hold moderated online discussions. And in October of this year, city councillors and senior staff began a series of weekly, midday online chats, revolving around pre-announced topics concerning Ottawa's growth management plans and proposed strategies. So, whether it's Indianapolis or Ottawa, it appears that citizens are anxious to have their say online.

"It's no problem to get people at the local level to participate," says Peters. "The challenge is to do it in a meaningful way that allows them to see that the results of their participation have impact."

Of course, ensuring that this happens depends very much upon how the consultation was conducted in the first place, and how easy it is to interpret participants' input.

Peters points to the experience of Canada's proposed new War Museum as an example of how not to e-consult. The War Museum attempted to get the public to participate online in choosing a design for the new museum. To do this, it presented design concepts on its website and asked for comments. But at approximately 10 days, the consultation was much too short, says Peters, and the responses submitted by participants were qualitative only and unstructured. The result was information of limited use.



So how *should* e-consultation be done? First decide on who you want to consult, about what exactly, and then determine what tools and methodology to use. There's no single best approach. In working with the Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada (the Romanow Commission), Systemscope used an online consultation workbook and a combination of techniques to attract the participants the Commission sought – some 16,000 of them. In consulting with rural youth, Systemscope successfully recommended that the Secretary of State for Rural Development use a real-time moderated dialogue session.

Its latest project, for the Sub-Committee on the Status of Persons with Disabilities, will use a different approach again. First, it will invite participants to “share their story” with the Committee by communicating online, with an option to make the story public on the Web. Upon receipt, the stories will be carefully analyzed. Participants will be asked to present their solutions to the problems that have been identified, with an option to have these solutions analyzed by a research team and a further option to post the information on the Web. Lastly, another component, the Issue Poll, will outline issues and options for action, and then ask participants to answer questions based on information that is provided.

Clearly, e-consultation has many applications, some of them not even thought of yet – including the procurement process.

“I can see it being used more to assist the political decision-making process underlying procurement rather than on procurement itself,” says Peters. “But it could be used to determine procurement strategies. For example, potential bidders on a project could participate in a process to determine how the procurement process should work, how it could be improved – basically, a consultation on improving procurement.”

So, not only can e-consultation be procured to assist the decision-making process – using it as it is now in a limited way, decreasing risk for projects and politicians alike – but it might also be used to improve the procurement process. Now, there's an idea worth exploring. *///*

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