



IT procurement still under fire

by Richard Bray

Canada is the 2003 global leader in online government for the third year in a row, as selected by Accenture in its annual study, *eGovernment Leadership: Engaging the Customer*. Canada was the only country out of 22 to reach the highest ranking.

The study said e-government in Canada stands out for a gratifying list of reasons: “customer-service vision; methods for measuring success of services; broad, integrated approach to offering government services through multiple service-delivery channels; and a cross-agency approach to online services.” It did not happen by chance. The federal government spends billions of dollars annually on information technology and employs nearly 15,000 IT professionals. The results are measurable. More and more citizens have the ability to take advantage of online services, and the confidence to do so, from basic requests for information to filing their tax returns.

So what are we doing wrong? According to the Canadian Advanced Technology Association (CATA), the federal government is ignoring its responsibility to make online government a tool of economic policy. The way to achieve that is by turning information technology procurement into a process for stimulating and showcasing Canadian innovation.

In a consultation paper released in February, *Government On-Line (GOL): By, For and About Canadian Innovation*, CATA calls on the federal government to commit itself to innovation in IT, based on its dominant position as the largest consumer of goods and services in the country.

The paper calls on Ottawa to become a model user, a first customer, and to create a procurement system that is “fair, fast and forward-looking.” With a polite nod towards successful federal initiatives like “Connecting Canadians” and the single-window Canada website, CATA President John Reid offered this exhortation: “We now urge the government to take concerted and compelling action on a more systemic way to serve Canadians: make GOL an agent for prompting, pioneering and presenting Canadian innovation.”

The CATA paper calls for a radical transformation of the procurement process. CATA wants the Government of Canada to recognize its leading role by communicating a fresh vision of the future, by demonstrating leadership and by opening its mind and its cheque book to new solutions.

It’s probably fair to say that most procurement people would be pleased just to provide their clients with proven best-of-breed technologies. Rapidly changing technology, often mysterious trade rules and an invisible, but nevertheless real list of political priorities make today’s complex procurements challenging enough. But that is not good enough for CATA. The group wants the process to go at least one step further, by making government buying “a significant catalyst for innovation in Canada and a critical sale that can turn a bright idea into a hot commodity.”

Once it gets past the allusive alliterations, the CATA paper puts forward 10 recommendations, some of which most procurement specialists would welcome. It is hard to argue with government spending that is visible, accessible and subject to the same rules. And what buyer wouldn’t

want tools that could evaluate subjective criteria like innovation and Canadian content?

Other recommendations are viable, if only because it is not particularly difficult to appoint champions, advisory councils and auditors to lead the charge and measure the results. There is never a shortage of candidates for those positions.

Making something as ethereal as innovation a core competency for professionals, let alone a key criteria in procurement, is a lot more difficult, even if tools can be devised for its effective measurement.

Federal spending on information technology is already aimed at providing better service to Canadians, with a goal of becoming “the most electronically connected government in the world by 2005.” Several key drivers underlie that strategy. Done properly, automation can reduce the number of employees needed to provide services and eventually produce real savings. Reengineered processes can cut duplication and serve citizens more efficiently. Could achieving those goals possibly be seen as falling short? Should it?

Information technology and government procurement organizations already have an uneasy relationship. Even with good intentions on both sides, the failure rate of large IT procurements is still unacceptably high. Procurement personnel are unlikely to welcome a fresh set of demands on their time and energy, and it seems highly improbable that their political leaders will impose them. CATA can ask for a new procurement process, but until its recommendations can reduce the risks instead of increasing them, the status quo looks more than good enough. ❧

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