

Beth Noveck on the Future of Government Transparency

Steve Towns, Editor | July 6, 2009

[Beth Noveck](#) leads President Barack Obama's open-government initiative. On leave from New York Law School, she is an expert on technology's impact on legal and political institutions. She's also the author of a new book called [Wiki Government: How Technology Can Make Government Better, Democracy Stronger and Citizens More Powerful](#).

How does the state and local government IT community fit into federal transparency efforts?

When we talk about creating government that actually taps citizens' intelligence, involves them in decision-making and creates opportunities for engagement, I think that has to start at the state and local level. [Also] the state CIO community is particularly important when it comes to getting information back into the federal government in order to inform decision-making. We're heavily dependent on the states and localities for getting that information back to us - and on state CIOs in particular for helping to set standards and creating the back-end systems.

How will the Obama administration help other levels of government provide the kind of transparency the president wants?

The Federal CIO Council is moving toward really radical data transparency - transparency that's consistent with legal requirements, security, privacy, etc. - to help provision more and better government data to the public so it can be mashed up, visualized and used by people to create useful social applications or drive more accountability. Part of that is about getting out data, and part of that is going to be how do we make simple tools available for reuse by government agencies and also just modeling out good practices.

How are these efforts taking shape?

The White House Web site is doing amazingly far-reaching things, like taking questions and running a blog. The Office of Science and Technology Policy just launched a blog with comments, and we have a Twitter feed. When you start doing these things, it becomes easier for other people to take that first step. There's also the next step of helping to make tools available for those who want them. Many of these tools are cheap. They're free. They're easy to maintain. It's just a matter of being ready and willing to put a toe in the water and say, "We're going to try this, and we're going to see what works for us and really try to adapt new innovations."

How will you measure the impact of these innovations?

Developing recommendations on transparency and open government has to include a process for developing metrics. We can talk about the number of data feeds we've released, or the number of people who've participated in rule making [but] we really have to look at transparency and participation to a specific end. So if our goal is improving the quality of American education or increasing accessibility and affordability of health care, we really have to look at those as the metrics and ask ourselves, "How does driving innovation into the way the public sector works help us to ultimately do the job better of making those hard policy decisions?"

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