



Shared Public Services: A Western IT Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Shared public services are an important tool for many governments to consider and to implement, depending on each government's existing social and economic circumstances. Increasingly as more and more municipalities are being forced to either raise taxes or curtail services, the need for shared services among various counties/districts becomes increasingly attractive. Shared services encompass all types of municipal and public services, including Information Technology such as E-Government and computerization of records. As the systems and needs of governments become exponentially more complex and diverse, it will be essential for services to be provided with the highest level of efficiency, effectiveness and performance. This paper will examine three countries attempt to implement shared services in the IT sector, with possible ramifications for state and municipal governments in India.

Keywords: Information technology, shared services, public, Australia, England, United States, New Public Management

1. New Public Management

An alternative approach to government's management of public services has been proposed since the mid 1980's when New Public Management (NPM) first came into vogue (Hood, 1989). New Public Management is a broad and complex term used to describe the wave of public sector reforms which occurred throughout the world since the 1980s. The main hypothesis in the NPM-reform wave is that increased market orientation in the public sector will lead to greater cost-efficiency for governments, without having negative side effects on other objectives and considerations, such as a deteriorated quality and level of public services (Pollitt, 1993).

New Public Management has its roots in the Minnowbrook conference of 1968 and prominent theorists such as Christopher Hood (1989) and Christopher Pollitt (1993) have written that New Public Management fosters a strongly managerial role of government. The managerial role of government is highlighted to allow for governments to provide a higher level of quality and efficiency in public services, a focus on public accountability and core public service values (Hood, 1995). New Public Management is oriented towards optimum outcomes through stronger management of municipal budgets. New Public Management doctrines tend to be opposed to egalitarian ideals of managing without managers, judicial doctrines of rigidly rule-bound administration and doctrines of self-government by public-service professionals (Hood, 1995).

New Public Management applies market-like mechanisms to the public sector and encourages the usage of

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privatization and out-sourcing of municipal functions (Pollitt, 1993). These theories promote competition as it is known in the private sector, to organizations of public sector, emphasizing economic and leadership principles. New Public Management addresses beneficiaries of public services much like customers (another parallel with the private sector) and conversely citizens as shareholders (Pollitt, 1993).

New Public Management (NPM) has had more than one type of definition depending on which author's view is examined (Lynn, 1996). Pollitt (1993) wrote about the managerialism aspect of NPM involving:

- Continuous increases in efficiency.
- The use of "ever-more-sophisticated" technologies.
- A labor force disciplined to productivity.
- Clear implementation of the professional management role.
- Managers being given the right to manage (Pollitt, 1993).

Throughout the history of the public sector, there have been cycles of examining the need and rediscovering a focus on productivity, performance and control (Walsh 1995). Another definition of NPM has to do with the idea of indirect control rather than direct authority (Walsh, 1995). Strategically the bureaucracy attains its objectives through creating processes of management that involve appropriate incentives and value commitments. The emphasis is placed upon the need for managers to be appropriately motivated and believe in the correct method of achieving the right goals (Walsh, 1995). Accordingly, indirect control in NPM has several principles:

- Continual improvements in quality.
- Emphasis upon devolution and delegation.
- Appropriate information systems.
- Emphasis upon contract and markets.
- Measurement of performance.
- Increased emphasis on audits and inspection (Walsh, 1995)

2. Reinventing Government

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the New Public Management model shifted paradigms and had a new outgrowth in its theories, known as the Reinventing Government model proposed by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). The Reinventing Government model advocated the usage of private sector innovation techniques, most notably with allowing greater flexibility for managers. Osborne and Gaebler (1992) believed that a business customer oriented model would work more effectively and efficiently for citizens than the traditional government model. Citizens were to be referred to as clients or customers and their input was to be actively sought (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992).

Osborne and Gaebler (1992) argued that government services often fail to meet the needs of their customers, because funding for services comes not from customers but from elected representatives like legislatures and city councils. As governments throughout the world become increasingly complex and diverse, the needs and preferences of customers are no longer homogeneous, yet governments still provide standardized services.

Osborne and Gaebler (1992) wrote that government must make a greater effort to perceive the needs of customers and give them a choice of producers. In order to learn the needs and preferences of its customers, government should give them a voice through methods such as surveys, customer contact, customer interviews, customer councils, and ombudsmen.

To respond to the needs of customers, however, it is not sufficient to know about their needs. It is also necessary to let them have a choice of providers by putting resources in the customer's hands' through

vouchers and cash grants, for example. This "customer-driven system" approach has many advantages:

- **Accountability:** It makes service providers accountable to their customers: if customers can choose their providers, providers would meet customers' needs
- **Apolitical:** It can minimize political influence from choosing the service providers. When a public agency selects providers, politicians may interfere with the decision. In this case, the providers with the largest constituencies will be selected, regardless of the quality of the service they can provide
- **Innovation & Competition:** It stimulates more innovation. Competition will make providers pursue the most efficient way of providing service, so that they will invest in innovation
- **Choice:** It makes it possible for customers to choose the service that they want
- **Demand, Supply & Parity:** This approach wastes less, because the quality and quantity of service are determined when supply meets what consumers want, rather than when supply meets what legislatures or city councils want
- **Consumer, Loyalty & Commitment:** It makes consumers commit themselves to the service. For instance, students are more committed to education in schools they have chosen
- **Equity:** It provides the opportunity for greater equity. For example, if government funds institutions rather than individuals, on the one hand, institutions that are targeted at the poor will deteriorate and the poor will be stigmatized. On the other hand, the institutions not limited to the poor will promote inequality, because the most intensive users of the service are the affluent. In contrast, through this approach, governments can equalize the funding for each individual and get rid of the stigma of the poor (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992).

There are some limitations to this approach. It cannot be applied to the regulatory sector, because in this case the primary customers are not individuals but the community as a whole. This approach is best applied to service delivery. The other drawback is that it cannot be applied when market is dominated by a monopoly situation, and when competition for a service would result in inefficiency, as is the case with garbage collection routes.

Osborne and Gaebler (1992) note that in addition to putting resources in their customers' hands, governments must also restructure their existing bureaucracy. Since the traditional public systems are designed for administrators and service providers, it is somewhat unrealistic to expect public managers to serve customers. According to them, the bureaucracy should be transformed from the old systems to new systems that are both "user-friendly" and "transparent." Customers should not be faced with a confusing maze of fragmented programs, conflicting eligibility requirements, and multiple forms to fill out and they should be able to sort through their options without having to sort through the complex bureaucracy behind them.

The *Reinventing Government* model promotes the usage of private sector innovation, resources, and organizational ideas to improve the public sector. This model was advocated by Vice President Al Gore in the 1990s and adopted by the Clinton Administration. This model has broad appeal in the United States and other countries, especially in Europe. Some criticisms of this model is that it emphasizes people as "customers" rather than "citizens" and that customers are placed as an end-product user of government rather than part of the policy making process. This model focuses on a person as a unit of the economy rather than democracy. Some public administration theorists define New Public Management as a combination of disaggregation (splitting large bureaucracies into smaller, more fragmented ones), competition (between different public agencies and between public agencies and private firms) and incentivization (Dunleavy & Margetts, 2006). Defined in this way, New Public Management was the dominant intellectual force in public management outside the United States from the early 1980s to the early 2000s.

3. What are Shared Services?

During the early 1980's shared services was an organizational and management tool first utilized by the private sector and later adopted by the public sector a decade later (Spoehrer, Burger, & Barrett, 2007). In the business sector, shared services work as distinct units within individual organizations which then unite to provide services to a group of organizations (Spoehrer, Burger, & Barrett, 2007). By the mid-1990's, shared services began to be used in the public sector as well.

Public sector shared services can be thought of as an extension of the Reinventing Government movement, due to shared services emphasis on a community-oriented government, less wastefulness and an entrepreneurial approach to public management.

Shared services in the public sector occurs when two or more county or municipal governments join together to provide a service for all the residents within their jurisdiction (Vazquez-Cortes, 2008). Within the context of the public sector, there are usually two types of services. One is corporate services that are also known as back-office services which are generally administrative and transactional services (Spoehrer, Burger, & Barrett, 2007). Administrative services provide services to the community in the forms of:

- Human resources
- Information and Communications Technology (ICT), which includes E-government and IT services
- Finance
- Legal
- Internal audit
- Marketing and communications
- Facilities or estate management
- Travel services
- Security
- Procurement
- Asset management

Transactional type services include, but are not limited to:

- Payroll
- Council tax administration
- National non-domestic rates
- Housing benefits administration
- Council tax benefits
- Registration of births, deaths and marriages
- Planning and environmental enquiries
- Other repetitive information, handling and response services applied daily within local government (Spoehrer, Burger, & Barrett, 2007).

The need for shared services in various countries and across different forms of government varies widely. Shared services was originally created to provide better and more efficient services, but in recent years there has been a movement towards cost-saving measures as an expedient rationale to implement shared services in communities (Vazquez-Cortes, 2008).

4. Purpose of Shared Services

While controlling or reducing spiraling costs may be the primary motivation for most governments to engage in shared service delivery, it cannot and must not be the only reason. Depending on the circumstances of each government, there can be compelling circumstances for sharing services (Sinclair,

2005). Reasons for these services are:

- Increased efficiencies from economies of scale. Combined service provision may be less costly than separate activities
- A higher level of service (or more services) for the same resources
- Greater expertise and professionalism for service delivery

5. Australia

In Australia, a number of cities and towns such as Queensland, New South Wales and Western Australia have implemented shared services in their jurisdictions (Spoehrer, Burger, & Barrett, 2007). Shared services in these jurisdictions are both Administrative and Transactional. Payroll, leave entitlements and ICT services are examples of services which were shared jointly between departments or were outsourced (Spoehrer, Burger, & Barrett, 2007).

6. Problems in Australia

Results from these shared services experiences have not been exceptionally fruitful. In a final report researchers concluded that although shared services can have its benefits and merits, the experiences in Australia show that these services are not in the public interest (Spoehrer, Burger, & Barrett, 2007). Furthermore, the Australian researchers arrived at the conclusion that the shared services initiatives actually deteriorated the quality and quantity of public services. Other problems with shared service initiatives included union resistance and actual cost-benefit savings were not as greatly realized as had been projected (Spoehrer, Burger, & Barrett, 2007). In some of the cities examined, shared services were occurring in name only, used as a basis to slash jobs. This encouraged a downward slide in employee morale, which meant less satisfied workers and ultimately a lower quality of service delivered. It was recommended that municipalities should be cautious in their approach to implement shared services and once implemented, follow-up studies should be conducted routinely (Spoehrer, Burger, & Barrett, 2007).

7. United States

In the United States, shared services have also recently undergone a fresh resurgence (Bolton, 2008). Due to the current dire economic hardships in the United States, cities and towns have become more interested in shared services than in previous times. Traditionally, municipalities in the United States have successfully consolidated or merged services, such as fire or police departments, within two or more districts (Vazquez-Cortes, 2008). Emergency services such as 911 call centers have also been merged successfully in order for two or more districts can share the cost burden or providing services in a tightly knit metropolitan area. However, in some states such as Massachusetts, efforts to provide shared services have not entirely been successful such as in thirteen Western Massachusetts suburbs which tried to consolidate fire and police services and were not successful. In Berkshire County however, an effort to use technology to regionalize the area's emergency 911 services was successful and provides cost savings while not curtailing services (Bolton, 2008).

Other types of shared services utilizing information technology are police departments in the towns of Wrentham, Norfolk, Plainville, Franklin, and North Attleborough. These departments are banding together to create a wireless data-sharing network (Bolton, 2008). This effort is to improve police services in the communities. This type of shared service technology idea came to fruition because of the knowledge that criminals often move through various jurisdictions and municipalities, allowing them to bypass a warrant for their arrest or record of prior transgressions with the law because there was a lack of a common link between departments. State and local law enforcement departments have already begun work on an information sharing network among police departments known as SWISS or Statewide Information Sharing System (Bolton, 2008).

Several other police departments have begun to recognize the need and usefulness of technology and have even created specific technology specialists besides the usual IT staff. These technology specialists have become creative in their approach to using technology that is both germane and innovative. For example at the police department in Franklin, Massachusetts, the usage of podcasts and YouTube broadcasts has been used successfully in communicating effectively with police officers regarding announcements or public service messages (Bolton, 2008). Committees in other cities and towns have been created to explore other possibilities to share services using IT management. All of the experts agree however, that there is a long road ahead regarding the creation, effective management and successful integration of Information Technology (Bolton, 2008).

In New York state, IT shared services have been at the forefront of the state since 2005 when the Shared Municipal Services Initiative (SMSI) created which allocates money through state grants in order to create and manage projects for communities (Vazquez-Cortes, 2008). In New York there are two types of shared service agreements between local governments: Joint agreements and service agreements (Vazquez-Cortes, 2008). Joint agreements are when local governments pool their resources and share in the provision of services. Service agreements are defined as those in which one local municipality will contract to provide a service for another (Vazquez-Cortes, 2008). Both types of agreements can be advantageous to local governments, because they can trim costs as well as continue the uninterrupted flow of services to their constituents.

In the field of IT shared services, the New York Department of State has made a substantial effort to involve all the municipalities in exploring possibilities for collaboration by hosting a website which lists information regarding the grant processes as well as a database with shared services publications (Vazquez-Cortes, 2008). There are also examples of intermunicipal agreements, case studies of shared projects and a listing of all the grant awards. Information online includes links to other useful websites as well as the committed and dedicated involvement of major research universities and colleges such as the Government Law Center of Albany Law School (Vazquez-Cortes, 2008). All these efforts culminate in creating more resources allowing for greater communication among municipalities interested in creating effective shared services.

Effective communication among interested municipalities also allows for the monitoring of contracts awarded to various localities (Sinclair, 2005). As previously mentioned, educational institutions such as Albany Law School have been instrumental in providing research opportunities when awarding grants. Also, these institutions work with municipalities in creating effective case studies of shared service agreements and consolidated mergers. These case studies are not only efficient in categorizing why such agreements occur, they also analyze and examine why certain services succeed, while others fail (Vazquez-Cortes, 2008). A Partnership Network among colleges and universities has been established.

Issue specific research developed with the aid of universities provides technical assistance for the creation of program metrics in order to effectively analyze and assess cooperative and shared services efforts (Vazquez-Cortes, 2008). Regional training conferences are held on college and university campuses and involve local and municipal government officials to bring together ideas, share notes and improve shared services (Benjamin & John, 2008).

In New York State utilizing IT in shared services has proven useful in saving money while maintaining effectiveness. Estimated savings from all shared service projects is thought to be in the neighborhood of over \$245 million between 2007-2012 (Vazquez-Cortes, 2008).

In the state of Michigan, shared services have been aggressively pushed throughout the state. The Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG) is a strong supporter of consolidated and joint services

(Davis, 2005). SEMCOG has created a computer database with examples of success stories throughout the state. SEMCOG recognizes the concerns and nervousness among public officials when entering into agreements, and have published pamphlets to aid local officials in the transition (Davis, 2005). SEMCOG has also brought to light programs and administrators with awards since 1998 (Davis, 2005). A series of reports in conjunction with the Metropolitan Affairs Council (MAC) to assist communities with the creation of intergovernmental services has also been uploaded online (Davis, 2005).

In Minnesota there have been efforts made to craft effective shared services throughout the state. There have also been examples to establish and manage IT shared services. Starting in 2001, the city of Anoka entered into a license agreement with the county of Anoka for direct access to the county's TAXSYS computer system in order to provide better information for residents (City of Anoka, 2001). The Anoka Police Department with the assistance of the state Joint Law Enforcement Council has established a county-wide computer system for law enforcement departments for more effective policing. In addition, like other counties, the Anoka Police Department uses a countywide shared 911 emergency system for central communications, thus reducing costs overall for each individual municipality (City of Anoka, 2001).

8. Problems in the United States

A continuing problem for government officials while striving to consolidate and regionalize services was appeasing the police and fire unions. These unions fought hard against the sharing of services because they were fearful that their members would lose their jobs with the introduction of shared services (Bolton, 2008; Davis, 2005). 911 emergency services were utilized by older, retired or injured fire and police officers as an alternative job once their career circumstances had changed (Bolton, 2008). Even though the communities had no plans to cut jobs from either the police or firefighters, their unions wanted some type of monetary assurance or settlement fee if the plans were implemented (Bolton, 2008).

Expertise and effective management is another part of the problem when examining the creation of IT shared services in communities. Unions are another barrier to solving the shared services dilemma. The biggest problem lies in the form of adequate amounts of funding. State and county budgets are being tightened across the United States as a spiraling recession is occurring. Services are either being curtailed, cut back or eliminated entirely in many jurisdictions. State and local governments have entered into heated debates for the raising of property taxes but so far they have been unsuccessful in their efforts. However, as the current economic woes lengthen, taxpayers may be forced to either pay more for services by an increase in their taxes or be forced to accept changes or cuts in their services, perhaps affecting the quality of the service.

9. England

In England, shared services have also been utilized for some time. However, in England among city and municipal managers, there has not been a large amount of enthusiasm for these services in terms of their effectiveness in saving money for taxpayers. Among a survey conducted by the law firm Browne Jacobson, with a178 public sector managers, adult social care and children's services were the most positive about the benefits of shared services (Community Care, 2008). Two-thirds of these managers felt that shared services allowed for better response time and flexibility, as well as effective delivery of shared services. Back-office functions, such as IT services were among the most common type of shared services (Community Care, 2008). Among social care managers however, only 11% felt that shared services could be used to curtail costs in their organization's budget (Community Care, 2008). The majority of the managers did believe that shared services allowed for improved relationships with their clients and brought about a more personalized approach to government (Community Care, 2008).

10. Problems in England

Problems in England's experiment with shared services relate to unions having a fear of a loss of jobs or demotions. Some of these fears are well-founded as some reports have found that most shared service endeavors simply are a firing of personnel in order to cut costs (Spoehrer, Burger, & Barrett, 2007). However, although shared services may not work in every instance or in every department, there are instances, especially in IT shared services which are not only cost-effective, they are actually an improvement on the service being provided, such as 911 emergency shared service phone calls (Bolton, 2008)

11. Concerns regarding Implementation of Shared Services

Local officials should not implement or try to implement shared services without first considering the input of members of the community (Benjamin & John, 2008). There are a plethora of reasons, both counterfeit and genuine regarding why community members would not be interested in establishing shared services in their city or town. Moreover, without taking into account input from the community, city officials would not be able to provide satisfactory services or improve existing services. Research conducted through surveys and reports prepared list several key concerns when shared services programs are being considered. Among them:

- A concern over loss of control over services and a reduced level of responsiveness by those providing the service
- Fear over the potential loss of municipal identity if services are provided by workers wearing the uniforms or driving the vehicles of a different municipal entity, such as county workers driving a county truck and taking care of town streets
- Fear that efficiency will lead to uniformity of service levels, with service levels dropping to a common level instead of rising
- Fear that larger communities will be favored over smaller ones
- Concern over the loss of jobs and the loss of a personal level of service that might be provided by a fellow resident of the community
- Suspicions that costs will increase later as employee bargaining units utilize salary and work rule differences to increase wages and benefits to the level offered by the highest paying community (Benjamin & John, 2008).

12. How can shared services be successful?

- Designate a person or office to serve as a clearinghouse of local information and facilitator of new agreements
- Generate public participation and involvement in developing and carrying out an agenda for shared services.
- Work with the local government employees who will be directly affected by service sharing agreements
- Commit to specific action items as soon as possible
- The shared service to be provided must be equal or better than the existing service
- Financial benefits must be demonstrable and meaningful
- The arrangement must be seen as mutually beneficial and not a 'bail out' for one jurisdiction.
- The parties to the agreement must have an opportunity to back out of the agreement with appropriate notice
- The discussions leading up to the agreement should involve employee representation (Sinclair, 2005)

13. Concluding Remarks

When governments consider implementing shared services in their communities and neighborhoods, officials would be wise to evaluate all types of services prior to voting to change or modify services provided. As research has demonstrated, the most vital reason for implementing shared service programs should not be about cost savings, but the reasons should be more intrinsically related to improvements in service delivery and quality (Spoehrer, Burger, & Barrett, 2007).

Municipal and local governments in India could take key lessons from the three countries examined in this paper. In India, plans to implement shared services with regard to IT or ICT shared services would be most useful among towns or villages separated by distance. Some types of IT services such as E-Government have already been established and are flourishing. IT shared services is the next logical step, but government officials should be prepared to analyze and examine the current system carefully prior to entering into agreements with each other.

As mentioned before, cost savings should not be the primary motivation when entering into shared services agreements. The principal reason should be an interest in providing the most efficient and effective service to the citizen. It is worth mentioning and cautioning government officials that implementing shared services can be a costly and time-consuming effort and should not be entered into with haste. In addition, a performance measurement approach should be utilized following the implementation of IT shared services. Collaborations with colleges and universities will allow for the development of a common benchmark and comparison system when examining the services in various communities. Where necessary, unions and other workers who are fearful of a loss of jobs should be reassured that they will not lose their job and efforts should also be undertaken to compensate workers adequately, or provide alternative employment for any jobs being severed. These efforts will ensure that the citizen's welfare and interest is paramount while preventing employees from creating mischief with the implementation of shared services.

14. Future Research Propositions

Future research should analyze and examine key points of not only what works for IT shared services, but why and in what capacity. Public managers in India for example should first ask themselves prior to implementing a IT shared services plan as to whether this is a necessary step or one of political convenience. The second step should be to ask the community what they desire and once the plan has been implemented, a follow up study should be commissioned to examine what worked, why and how. Replications of successful strategies may then be implemented and magnified, ongoing assistance sought from colleges and universities in order to compare study and create case studies and publications. Scholars should also focus their efforts on examining those IT shared services which have been successful in the past and if these efforts should fail, find out why this failure specifically occurred. Even among those IT services in communities which have proven successful with regard to cost-savings, high employee morale and a satisfied citizen-customer base, a re-examination is necessary as to understand why and to what extent the IT services are working. Doing so may create more questions than answers, but it would be a worthwhile endeavor if specific successful services can be identified and then replicated successfully in other communities.

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