

Creating Networked Cities

Recommendations on strengthening personal networks in California local governments

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In April 2013 the California Civic Innovation Project released a report, *The Case for Strengthening Personal Networks in California Local Governments*¹, highlighting the important role of knowledge sharing in the diffusion of innovations from one city or county to another, and identifying personal connections as a significant source of information when it comes to learning about and implementing innovations. Based on findings from CCIP's previous study, this report makes recommendations on how local government leaders, professional associations, and foundation professionals might promote and improve knowledge sharing through developing, strengthening and leveraging their networks. Strong local government networks support the continual sharing and advancement of projects, emerging practices, and civic innovation.

In developing the recommendations for this report CCIP worked closely with multiple small stakeholder groups, like the Institute for Local Government's Board of Directors and Marin County's Innovation team, to present findings from the knowledge sharing study and solicit recommendations for strengthening knowledge sharing and networks among local governments.

¹ Burstein, Rachel (2013). *The Case for Strengthening Personal Networks in California Local Government: Understanding local government innovation and how it spreads.*

Based on feedback from practitioners and CCIP's research, several primary recommendations in the report focus on the importance of face-to-face meetings in establishing trust and building relationships. Once relationships are established and communication channels opened it is imperative that ideas and emerging practices be adapted and scaled depending on the size of the locale and the resources available. From lobbying Sacramento to partnering with elected officials to growing foundation funding, the report suggests recommendations for increasing resources and support for the adoption of new approaches within local government. And lastly, the report offers numerous case studies from public and private sectors that offer practical examples of the recommendations put into practice.

Recommendation 1: Reframe the Conversation

Our survey of city managers and county administrators reveals wide variations between the perceptions of city and county administrators in urban areas and those in rural cities and counties. In addition, there is a profound disconnect in understandings of what constitutes innovation between those who work in local government and those on the outside. Professional associations and nonprofits promoting municipal innovation need to work harder to reframe the conversation around innovation to reflect the fiscal realities and needs of most local governments and their residents, while still pushing for new approaches.

This requires professional associations consulting local government staffers about the problems that need to be solved and developing models that can be scaled down to accommodate different types of cities and counties. Many interviewees from smaller, less well-resourced communities heard concepts like “open data” or locales like San Francisco and immediately assumed that they could not develop those types of projects in their own municipalities. Such local government employees need to be supported in undertaking innovative approaches in ways that make sense given their resources. More opportunities for engagement and relationship-building between staffers of different types of cities and counties, and providing opportunities for allies of those local governments (the public, professional associations, foundations, non-profits, etc.) to develop solutions jointly may aid in this.

Case Study: GitHub

GitHub, a web-based hosting system for software projects, might not be an obvious model of collaboration for most government staffers but in the software development world it is highly recognized as one of the best places to share code with friends, coworkers, and strangers. GitHub is designed for sharing and “forking”, essentially taking code from a project and making changes to it.

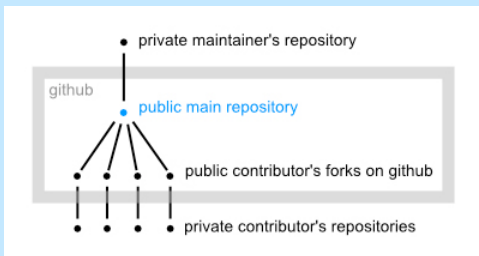


Image 1: Typical distributed setup of git repositories for collaboration on a github hosted project. Image from <http://www.eqgon.com>

Similar to the challenge of adapting projects from big cities to small towns, software projects often result in adaptations and variations of the original. GitHub is a community of over three million users, all using the same repository to collaborate. By encouraging projects to be developed

publicly and openly, GitHub’s community of users can contribute to multiple projects, even those they do not own, resulting in a community of practitioners that is constantly improving projects. Additionally, the importance of a project’s team size (small vs large) begins to disappear as people informally contribute to multiple projects within GitHub. This form of collaboration, done openly and designed for easy adaptation of ideas, practices and products, is a model that could be used to better share knowledge between small and large cities, and help adapt projects while also improving the model for future cities.

Link for more information: <http://www.github.com>

Recommendation 2: Fund Local Governments Directly

For the vast majority of local government staffers, public-private partnerships are not especially valuable. In our study of knowledge sharing practices among city managers and county administrators, interviewees often related the unpredictability of such relationships, and the difficulty of aligning missions to satisfy the needs of both groups. Rather than expanding internal capacity, many administrators reported that such partnerships actually distracted from their core missions and required oversight that took time away from critical projects. While most local governments do not have access to foundation funding to develop adequate capacity and to investigate new solutions thoroughly, those that do often receive it indirectly, through non-profit organizations. In such cases, local governments often act as sub-contractors, forced to contort their priorities to the grant specifications of an external organization whose chief goal is not to improve governmental efficiency or develop leaders within government.

This is often the case of hackathons whose end products often do not relate directly to community need -- empowering low-income people to participate in public-decision making processes, or improving internal service delivery models, for example -- as identified by governmental staffers. Cities and counties are charged with

taking the pulse of their residents, and foundations should try to access this knowledge. Bloomberg Philanthropies launched the Mayor’s Challenge in Fall 2012 and has since award \$9 million to local governments advancing innovative solutions to national problems. The contest not only funneled significant resources into local government, it generated over 300 submissions from cities proposing innovative ideas. If more foundations placed trust in local government by extending direct funding, this might result in more appropriate solutions for the kinds of problems that communities face. In addition, such a policy would allow foundations, themselves, to be more effective disseminators of knowledge between local governments, authenticating information, and investing appropriately in evaluation.

Recommendation 3: Get Beyond Tech

Technology alone is not the answer to more effective knowledge sharing, but it can be a valuable tool for developing personal connections and creating more cost effective means of knowledge sharing. In-person meetings and knowledge sharing are ideal, however with the current fiscal constraints facing most cities it is not always possible. Taking that into consideration, technology should be used to sustain relationships and knowledge sharing, however, ideally face-to-face meetings precede communication through electronic means. When such meetings are not possible ahead of time, it is important that video conferencing and other communication tools be used to facilitate contact between individuals and not groups. The impersonal nature of tools like list-servs and webinars is part of what makes them less effective for knowledge sharing related to innovation. In cases in which technology is used to mimic personal exchanges (e.g. virtual conferences), some prior contact needs to be established, either virtually or in-person. Technology can’t build relationships or establish trust, but it can help to make those relationships flourish in order to help diffuse innovative approaches to responding to community need.

Recommendation 4: Think Local

Geographic proximity and shared context are both important to the value of received information and the likelihood that acquired knowledge will be transformed into innovations. Local government employees can create more opportunities for sustained contact with colleagues in cities and counties nearby. Such groups should not emerge simply as a response to a regional problem (e.g. water shortages) or to organize regional collaborations (e.g. shared services), though these groups often do good work. However, groups can also serve as ongoing relationship-building tools without set agendas. Professional associations can play a role in convening such gatherings, but ultimately employees need to take ownership of these smaller, localized gatherings by setting the agenda and building the network as appropriate. This is already happening in many communities, as county-based city managers groups attest. One might also imagine that cross-departmental or cross-level meetings could be helpful in some contexts and less helpful in others.

Case Study: Meetups

Meetups are in-person gatherings, organized online, that bring people together to interact, connect, and share their experiences. Meetup makes it easy for anyone to organize a local group or find one of the thousands already meeting up face-to-face. More than 9,000 groups get together in local communities each day, each one with the goal of improving themselves or their communities. In November 2012, a civic innovation focused meetup, CivicMeet, was established in San Francisco and is now occurring in five cities. CivicMeet is an international monthly meetup that helps connect public and private sector innovators working to create a more open, engaged civil society. These types of informal gatherings support knowledge sharing and network building at the local level.

Link for more information: <http://www.meetup.com/about/> & <http://civicmeet.govfresh.com/>

Recommendation 5: Encourage Collaboration, Not Competition

Our research shows that while awards can validate and recognize individuals and local governments pursuing innovative projects, they are not an especially powerful motivator of innovation, or especially valued as a characteristic of professional association, except for urban communities, and insofar as staffers and not elected officials are concerned. Awards can help in the initial stage of knowledge discovery about possible solutions, but even if they are divided by size of community or region, they offer no feedback mechanism for exploring customization options. Interviewees pointed to opportunities for collaboration within professional associations -- either to brainstorm solutions around a shared set of community needs, or to develop regional approaches to shared problems -- to be important in identifying, developing and implementing new approaches best positioned to work in their own communities. Though there is considerable investment of time and resources in developing such opportunities for those in local government to create new approaches collaboratively, this is a more valuable approach than simply promoting competition.

Recommendation 6: Connect People, and Grow Professional Networks

Rather than concentrating their energies around services that explore innovation, professional groups for those working in local government need to help build relationships between their members. The connecting power that professional associations hold is especially important for those who do not have extensive personal networks of their own. Professional groups should consider institutionalizing this connecting power through mentorship and buddy programs, direct introductions to people working on similar issues, and greater opportunity for feedback at formal events, such as Q+A and small discussion groups at conferences. Many professional associations, like the National League of Cities and US Conference of Mayors, serve as a clearinghouse for those who are investigating new approaches. This work should not only be done through

member directories or list-servs, but through targeted, personal introductions. And that relationship-building should ideally begin long before a particular innovation is considered. While a number of professional associations are leading the way in supporting network growth, they should act more deliberately to help their members build networks.

Case Study: Management Talent Exchange Program

Talent swap programs have been around for decades, but their importance in today's networked world is becoming increasingly important because they offer opportunities for individuals to build relationships, exchange ideas, and develop regional networks. In California, the Management Talent Exchange Program (MTEP) provides small and medium sized local government agencies employee exchange opportunities so that participants can develop new experiences, competencies and relationships. Through swapping employees, agencies and individual employees, are able to build their networks, collaborate with other local leaders and spread ideas from one city to another.

Link for more information:

<http://www.discovermtep.org/2013/index.html>

Recommendation 7: Invest in Evaluation as a Means of Promoting Failure and Sharing Knowledge

When it comes to capacity and willingness to innovate, our research reveals huge divides between urban and rural communities. The former are more willing to embrace new approaches than the latter, largely because of the resources available in each place. This results in more ability to take informed risks on new solutions to existing problems in urban local governments. But urban communities are also strapped-for-cash and often are wary about publicizing failures that cost large sums of money. Instead, they often continue to pursue failing projects, hoping to salvage something that they can later promote in the press. In such cases, a more effective approach would be to end projects and publicize failures, informing other communities about

what aspects of development and implementation worked and didn't work, and assessing the outcomes relative to the intended purposes. Such a strategy would require the creation of criteria for assessing the project from the outset, and it would also require considerable political will. But transparency and estimated return on investment from the beginning could also demonstrate the cost savings attached to not continuing a failed policy or program. Professional associations and foundations can set the tone, encouraging the reporting of failures, and disseminating that information to other types of communities that might try to replicate well-publicized, but as yet unproven techniques.

Case Study: FAILFaire

In software development circles "fail fast, fail early, and fail often" is a constant refrain. This is because success often comes from failure. But too often organizations do not talk about failures because they are perceived as negative and something never to admit to. FailFaire, an open source project, was born out of the need to recognize failures as learning opportunities, allowing participants to openly share failures so that others can also learn from them and avoid making the same mistakes. The third annual FailFaire, hosted by MobileActive, was held in New York City and brought presenters from UNICEF and the National Democratic Institute, among others, to share their epic failures. One of the failures discussed during the NYC event was described in a FailFaire [blog post](#) as "Tech in search of a problem: Is the introduction of technology in a project actually solving a problem? Ask end users how the project will work in their day-to-day lives and if it is necessary and needed. Although technology is often a 'sexy' option, a low-tech solution may be a better choice."

Understandably, admitting failure and discussing it openly is not easy, for local governments the best approach might be to begin with sharing failures internally at the division level, once benefits are recognized from sharing failures then it might be possible to expand the audience and begin sharing at a city or county-wide level. Rather than sweeping failures under the proverbial rug we should encourage honest

discussions about them and highlight them as learning opportunities.

Link to more information: FAILFaire is a completely open-source concept and all collateral on this site is licensed under Creative Commons license, including the logo, name, and all content. Feel free to roll your own FAILFaire in your city and your field! <http://failfaire.org/>

Recommendation 8: Partner with Elected Officials

Depending on their vision, expertise, leadership and commitment, elected officials can be local government administrators' most important ally in pursuing innovative approaches, or their greatest obstacle. In our study of local government administrators, interviewees consistently provided examples of cases in which an elected official's endorsement and public promotion of a particular policy or program advanced that cause. In some cases elected officials came into office and asked administrators to recommend approaches to solving a particular problem, or to suggest areas of government or policy (e.g. transparency, transportation, housing, etc.) that needed to be improved. In other cases administrators came in with an agenda and asked administrators to deliver on that agenda, either through defined policies or at their own discretion. Administrators often resented this latter approach, as it ignored their expertise and compelled them to pursue policies which they felt might not be effective, while also handling the routine matters of local government.

Administrators can help avoid such problems by working actively to create partnerships with elected officials from the beginning. Professional groups can do much to advance this cause. In some cases, sessions with both elected and appointed populations at conferences and at other gatherings can advance an agenda of knowledge sharing and effective communication in order to facilitate innovation. Some professional groups have also helped administrators deploy welcome orientations for newly elected officials, introducing them to city or county processes, and

establishing channels for communication early on. For example, the Institute for Local Government provides agencies with [resources and materials](#) to incorporate into existing welcome packets to help orient new public officials to their roles. These types of programs assist in building trusting relationships that can lead to administrators becoming partners in setting priorities, even if elected officials advance them through their leadership.

Recommendation 9: Lobby Sacramento and Washington

State and federal legislative mandates are a powerful motivation for innovating, though they do not always promote innovation on their own. Groups that lobby on behalf of local government administrators at both the state and national level can encourage lawmakers to introduce legislation to establish programs based on research about which projects have greatest impact, rather than simply relieve higher levels of government for responsibility for projects. For example, the AB-109 mandate for county jails to house certain kinds of state prison inmates might have included funding for developing programs to better address the mental health of prisoners, or to work toward crime prevention through new or proven methods. Lobbying alone would not have accomplished the inclusion of such stipulations and the funding to accomplish them. However, if local governments can demonstrate, articulate and publicize their value to the public, lobbying groups can use such narratives to make a more effective case for legislative action that rewards innovation at the local level and diffuses effective approaches.

Existing groups, like International City/County Management Association (ICMA) and the National League of Cities (NLC), that represent local government concerns in the public policy arena could advance the goal of transforming legislative mandates from knee-jerk reactions to revenue shortfalls into opportunities for experimentation with new approaches to existing problems and the wide adoption of innovations.

Recommendation 10: Curation and Centralization, Not Collection

In our study of knowledge sharing practices among city managers and county administrators, interviewees repeatedly told us that the biggest obstacle to knowledge acquisition and knowledge sharing was a lack of time and resources to evaluate the vast resources related to innovation available. Most respondents felt that online databases offered by professional associations were useful for addressing certain kinds of problems, but were not especially useful for understanding and developing new approaches to respond to difficult and potentially controversial issues. Yet these databases have the advantage of housing knowledge in a central location, even if the information is not always especially well organized.

ICMA's Knowledge Network is a good example of both the potential and the current limitations of this approach. It includes a list of over 200 topic areas across nearly 30 categories, along with numerous groups to which participants can choose to belong. This is one way to limit the information accessible to participants. But without a way to certify content quality, or to contain or summarize vast amounts of data, the database is often hard for local government administrators to navigate. Still, when given the choice, local government staffers would prefer to go to one particular place -- either physical or virtual -- in order to obtain the information they need.

As noted above, professional associations can serve as clearinghouses, centralizing contacts rather than information. But they can also play an important role in curating and certifying content that is submitted, and incentivizing sharing of information. And they can be much more systematic in pushing out targeted information and contacts to the appropriate recipients through means other than allowing participants to identify topic areas in which they are interested. Ideally information and people will be pushed onto the desks of local government staffers who need that particular information and those particular contacts. This won't be possible in all circumstances given

the limited resources of professional associations. But this should be the goal, rather than simply directing staffers to a website where they are expected to form connections and evaluate the credibility of information on their own.

Recommendation 11: Engage Community Members, Not Just Community Groups

In our research, city and county administrators expressed understandable skepticism about using the positions of community groups as proxies for the pulse of the community as a whole, or as the best resources for knowledge related to new approaches. We repeatedly heard that local government leaders could better understand community needs and learn about innovations to address those needs if they had better ways of engaging more diverse elements of the community. This is not to say that they would necessarily use such approaches wholesale, but greater input would make the solutions they did implement more responsive to the residents they served. Our report does not address what methods should be employed to engage residents better, and there is a whole host of other organizations -- from the Davenport Institute to the Institute for Local Government -- producing valuable work on this topic. But it seems clear that approaches for engagement need to rely on a variety of platforms, need to allow lower-bar participation for people less committed to a position or unable to attend or adequately engage at hearings, and need to be communicated through personal relationships, often through community organizations. And, in order to continue this participation, government has to establish some means of following-up with residents who do participate.

Case Study: City of Oakland Public Participation Policy

One of the main obstacles to harnessing public input in government decision making is that the tools governments use are not adequate for participation or collaboration. For example, the typical three minute at the microphone scenario common to City Council meetings does not often result in better decisions being made by government.

Additionally, in-person only public comment discourages participation from a broad spectrum of residents who are unable to attend evening or work day council sessions.

Matt Leighninger, Executive Director at the Deliberative Democracy Consortium (DDC), developed model public participation policies for state and local governments, with the goal of providing a template for legislators to adapt into public engagement policies within various jurisdictions. In collaboration with the DDC and CCIP, the City of Oakland, California recently revamped its public participation policies by passing a resolution, Budget Adoption Transparency And Public Participation Policy, aimed at achieving public participation that influences outcomes and adds transparency to the budgeting process. Oakland's resolution is an example of a city seeking meaningful participation from the public in ways that allow the City to make better decisions.

Link to information on Oakland's resolution:

<http://bit.ly/OaklandTransparency>

Link to information on model Public Participation Policy:

<http://bit.ly/DDCmodelordinance>

Recommendation 12: Create Tools for the Entirety of the Innovation Lifecycle

In our research, interviewees told us that many tools that professional associations offer are useful for the initial stage of knowledge discovery related to innovative approaches. This is true of general internet searches, as well as newsletters or reports, list-servs, and databases. But such tools are much less effective at the later stages of the innovation process: evaluation of potential solutions, modification and customization, persuasion, decision-making, implementation, and assessment. These stages can also benefit from knowledge sharing. Many of the recommendations included in this report relate to personalization, informal exchanges, relationship-building and other efforts to put in place the infrastructure necessary to sharing information in useful ways about the other parts of the innovation process.

Conclusion

This report includes practical recommendations for local government employees, professional associations, elected officials, philanthropic organizations, researchers, technologists and others to promote more effective knowledge sharing in order to diffuse innovation between local governments.

CCIP is committed to supporting the adoption of these recommendations in cities throughout California. Through

establishing channels of communication for dialogue between groups that may not normally speak with one another, like foundation and local government staffers, CCIP can support the strengthening of local government networks. CCIP aims to develop leadership that encourages informed risk-taking, experimentation, and idea germination. The project also plans to contribute to a curriculum for city leaders that encourages them to adopt practices that promote innovation within government.



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