

Innovation expert Anthony Williams says the Web offers the public sector tremendous opportunities to transform service delivery, make smarter policies, flatten silos and reinvigorate government.

By Paula Klein

Web 2.0: Reinventing Democracy

TRADITIONALLY SLOW TO CHANGE, BUREAUCRATIC IN decision-making and constantly under public scrutiny, governments are ripe for new collaborative technologies, says Anthony Williams, co-author with Don Tapscott of the newly expanded book *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* (Portfolio, 2008). The book details how Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, wikis and social networking are radically transforming business models and altering the way organizations think about collaborative relationships.

Now, Williams, vice president and executive editor at the international business innovation think tank New Paradigm, and Tapscott, its CEO, have set their sights on what they call “Government 2.0: Wikinomics, Government and Democracy.” Williams says the Web offers the public sector huge opportunities to collaborate with citizens. He foresees Web 2.0 technologies being employed to transform service delivery, make smarter policies, flatten silos and, most importantly, reinvigorate democracy.

That’s a tall order, but Williams predicts a shift “from monolithic government agencies to pluralistic, networked governance Webs that fuse the knowledge, skills and resources of the masses.” He recently spoke with *CIO Insight* contributor Paula Klein. What follows is an edited, condensed transcript of that conversation.





CIO INSIGHT: What's the state of e-government in 2008?

ANTHONY WILLIAMS: Governments had invested heavily in moving public services online for well over a decade. E-government pioneers had hoped that their efforts would help usher in sweeping changes in the way governments are organized, their relationships with citizens and the policy-making process.

However, for a variety of reasons, these broader transformative initiatives have stalled in many jurisdictions, and much of the revolutionary promise never materialized. It turns out that transforming the deeper structures is a pretty intractable challenge, and there are often more penalties than incentives for innovative behavior.

We feel there is sufficient appetite for innovation in the public sector, and there are many promising Web 2.0 pilot projects and experiments already launched. We want to help give new purpose and direction to e-government initiatives over the next five to 10 years.

window access where citizens could visit one Web portal to file their taxes, renew a driver's license or review their Social Security account.

It's no longer sufficient to simply provide one-stop shopping for government services. Single-window services constitute one-way information flows to the citizen. In today's social-media environment, these one-way conversations fail to build credibility and trust in government. More importantly, they fail to harness the knowledge, skills and resources that could be tapped by government by using a more collaborative approach to service delivery and policy-making.

Traditional structures of government—typically top-down hierarchical models and silo approaches—are being called into question. They're just not as compelling as they once were. With the new, function-rich infrastructure of Web 2.0, government no longer needs to work on its own to provide public value.

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Are there many differences between Web 2.0 use in the public and private sectors?

WILLIAMS: Perhaps the obvious difference is that businesses have customers and employees, but the public sector also has citizens, who are much like shareholders. Citizens and shareholders are similar, but the citizen relationship is arguably deeper: It implies a set of rights and freedoms, as well as a set of obligations and responsibilities to the state.

The sectors also differ in how Web 2.0 can be used. Businesses and governments both worry about security when they deploy these tools, but there's a political aspect that the public sector has to be concerned about, too. Opposition parties are eager to pounce on any missteps and, as a result, there's less tolerance for failure in government than in the private sector, where people accept risk-taking as a precondition for innovation. Governments tend to be more cautious about Web 2.0 use and, given their unique constraints, that caution is somewhat understandable.

Define the phrase "governance Webs" and the role you see them having on societies.

WILLIAMS: The first decade of e-government was about moving services online and creating a single-

private sector, community groups and citizens. We call these networks governance Webs, or G-Webs. These G-Webs will deliver or perform activities that were once the exclusive domain of a single public agency or institution, thereby providing greater value and lower cost to the customers of government, and more engagement for the owners of government: the public.

G-Webs work because most organizations struggle to adjust to the pace of change and the complexity of the issues they face. Policy-makers are under pressure to respond to climate change, for example, and this has heightened the need to work in close collaboration with the business community and nongovernmental organizations.

The challenge in creating G-Webs is that there's enormous institutional rigidity. We won't see profound change overnight, but over time, there's an opportunity to change the division of labor in society. Governments will ask: "What is the best way to divide labor for the public good?"

What has been your research's biggest revelation?

WILLIAMS: The eagerness and enthusiasm for change runs all through the public sector—from the rank and file to senior leadership. They want to make changes,

and there's excitement about Web 2.0 technology. We also were surprised by the number of efforts under way at the grass-roots level—especially by young people who are coming into public service hungry to make changes and sometimes have an opportunity to drive the agenda.

The Net generation's lifelong exposure to digital technologies has given them an intuitive grasp of how collaborative tools and processes can make organizations more innovative, agile and responsive. That being said, they often are dismayed to discover that many of the applications and devices they're accustomed to using in their personal lives are not available professionally. In some cases, young government professionals have organized their own ad hoc communities that transcend departmental and organizational boundaries using blogs, wikis and social networking tools.

Not everyone agrees that these nascent networks are a good idea. We hear about a lot of enterprising, under-the-radar efforts getting stamped out by senior managers who cite concerns about data security, legal constraints or fears that sensitive information could leak out to the public. This will have to change if governments are going to alter the perception that they are overly rigid and out-of-step with the rest of the world. Indeed, the ability to recruit young people into the public sector will depend on it.

What are some examples of G-Webs in action?

WILLIAMS: Negative press surrounding intelligence missteps prior to Sept. 11 and the Iraq War convinced leaders in the U.S. intelligence community that they needed a flatter organizational structure that would be better equipped to cooperate, coordinate and share information. The solution was Intellipedia, which is essentially the intelligence community's version of Wikipedia. It allows analysts and officials across the federal government to share information over the Web and plan operations.

About 35,000 federal employees contribute to Intellipedia, and there are some 4,800 edits made every day. It's a good example of how to use collaboration technologies to let experts pool their knowledge, form virtual teams and make quick assessments.

Politicopia is another good example of how Web 2.0 can enable more participatory and transparent policy-making. It's essentially a virtual town hall meeting that was initially developed by Utah state representative Steve Urquhart. Politicopia runs on a wiki that lets users provide input into some 30 bills that are under discussion in the state legislature. Urquhart's goals are to politically empower constituents, to encourage

better dialogue in the legislature and to produce better ideas for the state.

Another quintessential G-Web example is Networked Knowledge Los Angeles, a diverse partnership of public and private organizations that empowers residents to improve their communities. The cornerstone of the project is an online tool that provides easy access to a vast collection of previously obscure public data about properties and neighborhoods facing urban decay.

Web-based tools transform this raw public data into formats that are meaningful to community residents and local policy-makers. The project looks for indicators of urban decay and plots the information on city maps posted on its Web site. Meanwhile, communities use the tools to map assets like community centers, libraries and local government offices.

Doesn't adoption also require a change in mindset?

WILLIAMS: The short answer is that most people are not ready for open-source government. There will be considerable resistance to change. A significant proportion of senior civil service is accustomed to the conventional command-and-control approach to management, and they won't change their work habits overnight. Some managers—particularly middle managers—fear that greater openness and participation in government may undermine their authority.

There's considerable skepticism about the role citizens should play in policy-making. Do they have the time and expertise to make meaningful contributions to complex policy deliberations? This debate goes back centuries. In the early 20th century, journalist Walter Lippmann questioned the competency of average citizens, comparing them to a deaf spectator in the back row. By contrast, [philosopher] John Dewey argued against "an oligarchy managed in the interests of the few" and was a proponent of greater citizen participation and democratic education. That debate continues.

What's different is that citizens now have unprecedented tools to inform themselves, to reach out to others with like interests and to organize as never before. Politicians have tools, too. There's no excuse not to use them. The infrastructure is there. It's about political will and a willingness to be open and to incorporate feedback and put it into practice. At the same time, digital communications make geography less relevant and reinforce the need to open up the policy-making process to global participation.

Governments that choose not to open up or those that fail to foster active participation in governance will eventually lose legitimacy and authority. Citizens increasingly self-organize to provide their own

entertainment, media and services. Is it a stretch to imagine a self-organized open-source approach to government? Governments can either be active participants in this process or unwilling bystanders.

Can Web 2.0 technologies live up to these promises and scale to a national level?

WILLIAMS: Software developers have already figured out how to scale up collaboration technologies to support global business enterprises, so I see no reason why Web 2.0 could not support hundreds of thousands of people in a real-time policy debate. Security is rightfully a concern, but the lesson from early corporate adopters is that security can be addressed if Web 2.0 applications are brought behind the firewall.

E-voting may eventually have its place among

stakeholders together to have discussions and forge alliances. Resource scarcity and religion, among other things, will still divide people, but I'm optimistic that Web tools will allow people to share ideas on issues such as how to mitigate the impacts of climate change. Communities committed to solving these problems are springing up to coordinate the efforts of people and organizations around the world.

On the other hand, terrorists use the same tools to inflict massive damage. Technology is widely available in a free society, and I'm afraid there's no putting the genie back in the bottle. The military has long recognized that the best way to fight a terrorist network is with a networked response. We'll have no hope of confronting organizations like al-Qaida if we throw

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a variety of digital engagement tools, but there are hurdles to jump. One is reliable identity management: How can we be sure that Citizen X is who he says he is? In the United Kingdom, there's an e-petitions process on the prime minister's Web site that allows citizens to organize petitions and add their signatures electronically. In 2007, one petition against a government road-pricing proposal attracted 1.8 million signatures, but it's not certain that they were from 1.8 million unique individuals.

For citizens, Web 2.0 tools offer an opportunity to get more engaged in the process of governing. Over the last half-century, we've seen a gradual drop-off in the level of political participation, such as declining voter turnouts, less engagement in civic organizations and so forth.

On the positive side, the 2008 U.S. election seems to be galvanizing the population in ways that we haven't seen in decades. What's particularly encouraging is that Barack Obama seems to have brought a lot of young people into the political process. My hope is that all citizens will flex their democratic muscles. Rather than being passive spectators, they will become genuine participants in democracy.

On a big-picture scale, what does it mean to society when organizations use Web 2.0 technologies?

WILLIAMS: Web 2.0 technology isn't a silver bullet, and it will not deliver world peace. But the upside is that Web 2.0 provides a platform for bringing different

up walls and limit communications across countries. Defeating terrorism will require unprecedented collaboration and information-sharing across national and organizational boundaries.

Are you being overly optimistic about how quickly Web 2.0 will take hold in government?

WILLIAMS: You can't expect radical change too fast. Governments are large, complex beasts subject to a number of constraints. In fact, the institutions of democratic government were deliberately designed to induce stability and prevent radical change. Stability can be quite healthy, but implementing change is difficult and onerous when deep and resilient traditions combine to frustrate progress.

It will take five, 10 and perhaps even 20 years for these changes to take place. But in the short term, we can demonstrate that G-Web models in government are possible, healthy and have good outcomes. Leaders who adopt them will distinguish themselves.

We've arrived at an important moment in history. Governments can play an active, positive role in their own transformation, or change will be imposed upon them. The transformation process will be exhilarating and sometimes painful, but the price of inaction is a lost opportunity for government to redefine its role in what could be a new golden age of democracy. +

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