

# Greasing the wheels

by Raymond R. Hession

## Implementing accountability in government: How do we proceed from here?

This article was prepared following “The Implementing Accountability in Government Roundtable,” presented by the Canadian Advanced Technology Alliance (CATA) and The Access Group on May 18, 2006. Sponsors included: SAS (Canada), Capgemini, CGI and the University of Ottawa. Participants included: Dave Dawson, Senior Policy Analyst, Air Policy Group, Transport Canada; Rejean Gravel, retired senior executive, Government of Canada; Mario Iannicello, Regional Sales Director, eastern region, SAS Institute (Canada); Sylvie Lafontaine, Chief Financial Officer, Service Canada; Dr. David Lewis, Executive Vice President, HDR/HLB Decision Economics Inc.; David Slater, Performance and Risk Management Department, Department of Family and Community Services, Government of Australia.

**W**HEN IT COMES TO running a government department or program and the procurements that occur daily in support of these, accountability, transparency, effectiveness and efficiency are vital expectations – just as with any publicly traded company, organization or entity. The ability to balance these expectations has remained a constant challenge for public sector managers for many decades.

The unfortunate situation brought forth by the Canadian government’s sponsorship scandal in 2004 confirmed the worst possible attitude that can exist among the public in any democracy – that attitude being that the system in place is there solely to reward political friends and insiders.

So what are the policies, systems, processes and controls that the government needs to improve that will result in good public accountability? What enabling technologies and information management capabilities are necessary so that Canadians will feel they have the necessary insight into their government’s activities and, ultimately, trust it more than ever?

The Government of Canada is not alone in its quest; governments in most modern democracies struggle with the daunting challenge of building an effective structure, while

maintaining responsible stewardship of public resources.

Delivering on its commitment to make government more accountable to the Canadian people, the Government of Canada tabled the *Federal Accountability Act* in April of this year. One of the areas the *Act* specifically references is “cleaning up the procurement of government contracts.” Through this plan, our government is intending to implement specific measures to help strengthen accountability and increase transparency and oversight in government operations.

During a panel discussion hosted by CATA (Canadian Advanced Technology Alliance) and the Access Group held in May 2006, veterans from the public sector came together to argue the issues of government accountability and the measures that need to be implemented in order to ensure that government accountability is indeed realized.

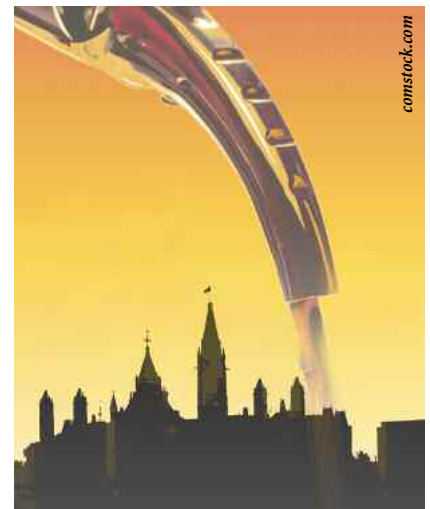
The executive roundtable participants, who were surveyed beforehand, cited concern over a variety of issues including:

- The need for more clarity on the implications of the new *Accountability Act* to the public service and the individual public servant.
- The restoration of the public’s trust both in civil servants and government operations.

- The fear of increased internal and external auditing.
- The concern that increased regulation and processes will impact efficiency.
- The effectiveness of decision making being hindered by the quality of information, as well as the lack of time and tools for collection, coordination and analysis.

What becomes most obvious is that achieving government accountability requires public servants to be armed with policies, processes and systems that allow them to manage effectively, help them to extract timely and insightful knowledge from great quantities of data, and give them the flexibility to use their own judgement. It is recognized that a capable and accountable government ultimately affects the public’s trust in the individuals responsible for managing public resources and the processes involved.

The three main pillars of government accountability, as identified during the exec-



utive roundtable, include personal responsibility and culture, communication of the strategy, policies and effective processes and, finally, an increased focus on information management (IM) demands driven by the necessity to reduce risks with more accurate, timely and insightful decisions.

## **Personal responsibility – promote an accountable culture**

In the aftermath of the sponsorship scandal, there is a need to rebuild public trust in the government. In general the panelists accepted that personal responsibility is a key factor, and arguably, the most important factor in facilitating government accountability and fostering public trust. Further, personal responsibility will only be effective if there are clear and successful communications on the measurement of accountability.

It was apparent from the participating audience in the roundtable that these public servants are passionate about maintaining a high level of integrity and personal responsibility in their service to the public. It is expected that the large majority of public servants feel the same way. But, a civil service of approximately 460,000 employees is no different than any other large organization – one should also expect to find some non-compliant or even fraudulent behaviour within its population.

The measures employed to deal with situations of non-compliance are critically important to the success of positive cultural change. Why employ punitive measures on the majority for the deeds of a few? It is therefore important that the government employ a combined strategy addressing accountability by employing measures of enforced compliance balanced with voluntary compliance.

The strategy of enforced compliance is about trying to create an environment where the potential offender either does not, or cannot, act on their intent and where, should they be initially successful, they are rapidly caught and dealt with accordingly. By far, the most attractive strategies in the area of voluntary compliance are based on the principle of 'enlightened self-interest' – personal benefits accrued by taking an active role in reducing the burden of non-compliance.

According to Dave Dawson, senior policy analyst with Transport Canada, the current system of controls, including performance agreements must be changed to require and encourage more personal accountability. In order for a system of controls to be successful, Dawson recommended that personal ac-

countability be embraced at the most senior levels of government and that a display of top-down leadership be exemplified. A linear approach would balance the need for incentives and consequences to achieve accountability.

## **Communication of accountability**

After many difficult years of downsizing, there is naturally some concern on the part of many civil servants as to how they

will support any additional workload associated with increased accountability.

For the most part the *Management, Resources and Results Structure (MRRS) Policy* and the *Management Accountability Framework (MAF)*, the existing policy and framework supporting accountability and transparency within the government of Canada, is already in place. It just needs to be

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communicated, augmented and reinforced within the public service and the Canadian public.

Any strategy only works if it is implemented correctly. Implementation works best if those who designed the policies are not responsible for their implementation. Implementation responsibility and control must therefore be delegated, monitored and evaluated. A disconnection between those who determine strategy and those who enact it can seriously impact the effectiveness of any strategy. Responsibility cannot be delegated without authority, and neither does delegation mean that all of the responsibility for success shifts to the delegated persons. Those to whom responsibility and authority is delegated are also duty-bound to report performance up through the management hierarchy.

In most organizations, a good number of the objectives and goals of the organization can be expressed or manifested as a process or procedure. However, processes only work if they are followed and cannot be circumvented. Processes also need to serve the needs of the organization and not the other way around – cumbersome and burdensome processes are the first to be abandoned in the workplace when an easier route is found.

In an organization where processes are well designed and service the needs of the organization, ignoring and/or circumventing them can often be an early indicator of non-compliance.

### **Information and analysis are the grease of good government**

There is a need to regularly review government resources in the area of information management (IM) to ensure that the systems and tools that are in place to access, collect and analyze information, guarantee both the timeliness, accuracy and the quality of the data being collected.

Improved integration of information technology, data integration and analytical systems throughout the public service and other governmental organizations is an absolute must so that the public sector managers can rely with confidence on the data.

Rejean Gravel, a retired senior IT/IM executive in the Government of Canada, suggested that more information about government spending and the management of public funds be available via the Internet. According to Gravel, it is difficult for the public to engage in the accountability dialogue and challenge programs or demand accountability when the access to information is limited or absent from public discussion.

The bottom line is that IM and data integration methods have to support the required level of transparency and provide trusted quality information that can be analyzed when needed. The *Federal Accountability Act* proposes an independent Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) to provide financial analysis about the nation's finances, estimates and proposals by committees and private members bills. Without timely access to accurate and trusted financial data, the PBO will be unable to provide insightful decisions with respect to its mandate of providing the 'checks and balances' of accountability.

It is also important that all the processes for dealing with data and information are reviewed and audited to ensure they are clearly defined and lead to accountability. If a process is not clearly defined, it cannot be measured and ultimately it will not support accountability for decisions and actions.

Mario Iannicello, government segment director, SAS Canada, argued that new strategies and improved tools are needed to deal with the accountability requirements set forth by the Government of Canada all the while maintaining current service levels. Iannicello echoed the comments made by other panelists with respect to execution of new accountability measures and the need for cohesive information systems to bring

data together so that it can be accessed and analyzed on a timely basis.

Data integration, business and analytical intelligence software and services, from companies like SAS, can help improve corporate and government performance through insight into vast amounts of data. The results include faster, more accurate business decisions based on a holistic view of data collected; this in turn would foster greater accountability among government organizations.

## Ensuring government accountability

The aftermath of the sponsorship scandal has shown that the current systems supporting accountability in government are NOT broken, although it is clear that they require review and augmentation in order to deter and prevent further abuse, as well as encourage and enable compliance.

A re-investment in building the ethos of personal responsibility and accountability is needed. To implement accountability, the government must define the vision and set its measurement. There needs to be a clear, shared vision for accountability, with common measures supported by a common vocabulary. Individuals need to clearly understand how they contribute to accountability and have the opportunity to take personal responsibility. The governments ethos must stem from a mantra, "What I do matters, I can make a difference."

Furthermore, improved and transparent information systems for data integration and analysis are necessary to rebuild public trust and confidence. The results will be good public accountability, as well as better public management. *///*

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## **COVER** New Songdo City, Incheon, South Korea.

Image rendering by Crystal Beijing, courtesy of master plan architect Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates PC. (www.NewSongdoCity.com; www.kpf.com)



**N**ew Songdo City is being created as a hub for north-eastern Asian commerce. It is being conceived from the ground up as a "ubiquitous city" in which residents and business will enjoy fixed-line fibre optics to every home and business; high-speed wireless computing access everywhere; fully integrated home networks; and the melding of facilities, IT and property services under one operational and management structure. Residential building types derive from the Korean penchant for high-rise living. The strategies of urban design, on the other hand, have been deliberately derived from reinterpretations of European, American and Asian cities, adapting them for the Korean context. This \$25 billion project – the largest private real estate development in history – is a joint venture between Gale International, a US-based investment and real estate development company, and Korea's POSCO E&C. *///*