

POLICY ARENA

Partners in improved service delivery

by Scott Hodge

Public-private partnerships and the use of new technologies have become common themes for improved service delivery and communication with stakeholders. However, the term *partnership* has become an umbrella phrase for various ventures ranging from “true” partnerships to innovative procurement approaches. Like any change initiative, improving operational efficiency and/or service delivery through partnering may not necessarily improve effectiveness in meeting the needs and expectations of stakeholders.

A true partnership is generally a long-term arrangement. One of the more successful public-private partnerships is the Teranet Land Information Services project in Ontario. [Teranet](#), a for-profit company, was created in 1991 through a partnership between Ontario’s Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations and a consortium of private sector investor and technology firms including EDS Canada, Intergraph Canada Ltd., SHL Systemhouse Inc., and KPMG. The Government of Ontario owns 50 per cent with the remainder held by the private sector consortium. Both parties provide equity investments.

The privatization has allowed the land information service to draw upon the strengths of all partners and explore new markets. Revenues continue to increase and, as a partner to this venture, the government now receives a dividend. Teranet has existing contracts to modernize the land information systems in Jamaica, Puerto Rico and the Czech Republic and is currently negotiating with countries on four different continents.

nGage Electronic Commerce is a partnership venture undertaken by MTS Advanced, a subsidiary of the Manitoba Telephone System, a former provincial crown corporation that has been privatized, and Silicon Graphics. [nGage](#) builds on the entrepreneurial spirit and speed for which MTS Advanced is recognized and the solid foundation provided by Silicon Graphics scalable hardware solutions, which constitute the backbone of nGage’s operation. In order to provide companies with complete end-to-end online commerce solutions, nGage has also partnered with Open Market (developer of secure Internet commerce software products), Paymentech Canada (provider of full service electronic payment solutions), iCat (developers of software products to build and host on-line catalogues) and Federal Express.

nGage assists clients with their online planning and store construction, merchandising and designing, sales and delivery, settling transactions, accounting and reporting and marketing analysis – all in a secure environment.

There has been substantial growth of public sector organizations incorporating technology solutions adapted from the private sector for their operations. These joint product development ventures are often referred to as “partnerships” but actually are a procurement tool to develop and acquire customized products designed specifically to meet the needs of the public sector organization. This type of partnership is generally short term, focused on a particular internal process and does not directly impact the client.

SunValley Software Inc., a leader in digital media technology, is one of several firms who establish relationships with clients for product development. [SunValley](#) has worked with several public, private and non-profit organizations such as Manitoba Labour’s Workplace Safety and Health Division and Ducks Unlimited Canada in developing CD-ROMs, website productions, kiosks, and digital video presentations for computer-based training, communication strategies or marketing applications.

Computer-based point-of-service applications from [Infocorp Computer Solutions Ltd.](#) have revolutionized how governments collect service fees. Infocorp’s POS+ allows government offices to improve customer service through greater efficiencies while controlling costs. The Province of Manitoba has implemented POS+ and expects to collect over \$100 million in annual revenues from 40 branches in 27 departments. Before a unison format was provided with POS+, each department had its own process for revenue collection, reconciliation, accounting and posting to the financial management system leading to several steps of re-keying information and slower recognition of revenues.

The Government of Bermuda has introduced POS+ to their customs operation in order to collect duty from residents returning to the island, with travellers’ waiting times during the peak season dropping from three hours to less than an hour. POS+ allows for transaction processing, management reporting and database updating and easily supports one-stop store fronts in a Windows-based, user-definable environment.

Technology solutions facilitate improvements in operational efficiency. Although technological advances have allowed various organizations to improve customer service and program delivery, they do not directly improve effectiveness or lead to more specific strategies. While the introduction of new technology and applications is a positive step, the role of strong leadership and communication with stakeholders to ensure their expectations and needs are being met continues to be very important in developing efficient and effective service. Public-private sector partnerships, whatever the timeframe, should offer the opportunity for gains by both sides.

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