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POLICY AT A GLANCE

Living the Wiki Government

What is it like to work in a wiki-government environment? The following is a story of two public servants working Wikily, inspired by the book [Wiki Government – How Technology Can Make Government Better, Democracy Stronger, and Citizens more Powerful](#), written by Beth Simone Noveck in 2009. By no means does Policy Horizons Canada neither endorse nor defend every idea presented in the book or in the story. However, some thoughts are worth considering.

It is 2020. Bill moves aside his web interface to a corner of the office window and gives a look to the street below. Citizens are walking at a leisurely pace, continuously connected to online communities through glasses or holograms floating above smart devices. One of them – the tall blonde maybe? – might even be contributing to the new regulation on non-emitting personal vehicles that Bill is facilitating.

Looking back, Bill remembers how in ten years, since Beth Simone Noveck's book *Wiki Government* came out in 2009, a lot has changed in the way institutions and society function. Adapting to the changes was not always easy. It all started at the local level as a bottom-up process. New Zealand was one of the first to implement it at the federal level; the experiment led to the revision of the aging *Policing Act*. There was still colossal work for public servants: 25,000 people participated in the wiki and someone needed to make sense of it all. Fortunately, this is not the only way to go. Usually, Bill targets a team of nine members on average to participate, choosing the most motivated and

experienced candidates with diverse perspectives.

Sometimes he uses a random selection process to reflect the population as closely as possible.



He often wonders how public servants used to work, back in the day. It must have been so hard! Collaborative democracy – defined as creating opportunities for engagement to strengthen a culture of participation in the decision-making process – is so much more efficient than the traditional hierarchical structure. The fact is, most of the knowledge lies outside the organization, so why not use it?

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Now, citizens are taking action, gathering information on specific problems, brainstorming and finding innovative solutions. They are even *drafting* policies! Bill and his colleagues define the problems, convene the right people into teams to work on a predefined and clear goal, encourage participation and divide the work into parts. To make it even easier for everyone, public servants share the lists of roles and tasks that need filling, and let the contributors find what feels right for them.

Creating a culture and a sense of belonging remains the main challenge. The group needs a shared sense of mission, along with clear guidelines. Good feedback, ratings, awards of excellence and a substantive remuneration based on competency always helps. The group needs a screen (the online space) where it sees itself reflected. When the magic happens, Bill's job is easier.

Of course, not everyone is as successful as Bill and his team. His friend Jack, who works for another department, has been struggling to get results from his online community. He was asked to invite senior officials representing large corporate interests. The result was a reduction in the contribution of other participants.

His previous experience was even worse. The policy question was thrown out without an engagement strategy. Did it work? Over 100,000 citizens offered their help, but quit over lost interest as they were not given a clear sense of their role or how their input would be used. The public servants were not able to filter the good inputs from the bad and were forced to start over by targeting ten experts on the subject. Jack is convinced that working with wikis is not effective in every situation. If it cannot be divided into parts, it becomes difficult to attribute tasks. As with face to face engagement, the most important thing is to frame the question and design an effective and meaningful process with clear expectations for the participants. It is key to find a way to engage the more knowledgeable people without falling into the hierarchy trap and having lobbyists "capture" the community. For his next assignment, Jack will begin with pre-selecting participants. He will be looking for motivated people with a range of expertise and lived experience.

The 10 Lessons Learned

1. Ask specific questions: define the context and ask clear questions so people know what to expect and what will be asked of them;
2. Ask the right people while creating opportunities for self-selection: professionals need more nurturing;
3. The process should be designed to achieve a goal and should be communicated up front;
4. Design for groups, not individuals: divide the work into smaller problems;
5. The Screen should mirror the group: participants need to perceive themselves to be part of a mini-movement;
6. Divide work into roles and tasks: list the available roles and tasks so people know what to do;
7. Harness the power of reputation: use ratings and awards;
8. Make policies, not web sites: look at the problem as a whole, focusing on how to redesign internal processes in response to opportunities for collaboration;
9. Pilot new ideas: use pilot programs, competitions and prizes to generate innovation;
10. Focus on outcomes, not inputs: design practices to achieve goals and measure success.



The Author - Beth Noveck and Wiki Government

During the last presidential campaign, Beth Simone Noveck was a volunteer advisor working for President Obama on issues of technology, innovation, and government reform. Once elected, the President named her the United States deputy chief technology officer for open government. Since 2009, she has led President Obama's *Open Government Initiative*.

Her team has ensured that every department and agency develop an Open Government Plan. Concrete steps have been taken across the government and now, hundreds of thousands of collections of government information are freely available to the public on the Web. Citizens are starting to use these new platforms to participate actively.

Ideas to consider

The book provides information on the Peer-to-Patent program which demonstrated the value of the “wisdom of the crowd”. Managing patent development in the United States is complex. A limited number of bureaucrats are flooded by a large quantity of applications. Beth Noveck was inspired by this issue to develop her vision on Collaborative Democracy. The Peer-to-Patent Program enabled the creation of an assorted team, opening the agency’s door and speeding up the review process.

The Peer-to-Patent Program shows how policy-makers can improve decision-making by harnessing networks to public institutions. According to Noveck, this idea can be transposed to the majority of today’s complex social and economic problems by using the crowd to solve them. She argues that the private sector has already understood the need to look beyond the organization for knowledge and expertise, and that public administration should start doing the same.

To everything there is another side

- [Jason Liszkiewicz](#), Executive Director of the Earth Intelligence Network, has participated in the U.S. Open Government experiment and believes that a lot of learning still needs to happen. Online collaboration, he argues, is messy and you often have to deal with disruptive participants that bring the collective efforts back to zero.
- [Rasmus Kleis Nielsen](#), a graduate student at Columbia University, thinks that too much feedback is impossible to manage. The main problem with wikis is getting stuck with documents that never close.
- [Jaron Lanier](#), an essayist for *The Edge*, explains how wikis can lead to the creation of “the hive mind”, which would have an impact on individual identities. He fears Wikipedia is regarded too highly and that this resurgence of the collective wisdom is closely related to extremist mentality.
- Anthropologist, Robin Dunbar, speculates that “as much as 42% of the group’s time would have to be devoted to social grooming.” (*The Tipping Point*, Gladwell)