3. Designing the Right Approach

While the great advantage of eEngagement is the wide array of approaches that can be applied to resolving policy and participation issues, the disadvantage of this flexibility lies in the difficulty of determining an appropriate approach at the outset of project initiation.

Technologies like the *World Wide Web* draw their power from the vast array of applications to which the basic technology can be applied. However, the very strength of this technology can lead to 'option paralysis'. In such cases, determining an appropriate model or program design from the existing case examples, or choosing from the vast array of potential and hypothetical applications that are still being developed, can be extremely complex.

One of the problems associated with eEngagement activities to date has been the tendency to emulate a limited number of options, rather than engage in broader experimentation and refinement. In particular, electronic discussion forums have been among the more popular eEngagement approaches.

It is possible here to recognise a limitation associated with 'unreflective' policy transfer and 'lesson-drawing' across jurisdictions. The important thing to consider when examining successful case examples from different cultures, jurisdictions, or policy areas is that:

- the nature of public participation in particular policy areas is highly variable, even within a local area. Careful consideration of the history of participation in your area of concern will guide your development process over the views of 'experts'. The relative newness of eEngagement does mean that expertise in this area is in short supply; and
- the political culture of a jurisdiction is often highly influential in determining the nature and extent of public participation in policy processes. In addition, the way in which public participation activities are assessed is highly dependent on local notions of what 'democracy' is. In areas where participation is high, the development of an eEngagement activity is likely to focus largely on the design and implementation of the communications channel, whereas in areas where participation is low, has not been encouraged in the past, or where high levels of community cynicism exist, a large amount of the work in developing a new engagement strategy will be focused on issues of community development and the creation of trust.

The basic design of an eEngagement approach will be highly influential in determining the success or failure of the final process. Maintaining commitment and support for eEngagement initiatives over time – particularly among key decision-makers – requires careful consideration of the following essential matters:

- what shape has the engagement process taken and is it appropriate?
- are public and/or target community expectations about participation realistic?
- are projected outcomes realistic?

3.1. Key Decisions

During the initiation phase of project proposal planning it is important to consider the following six questions:

1. What is the issue(s)?
2. Who are the audience(s)?
3. Consultation versus collaboration?
4. What objectives do we have for this activity?
5. How interactive will this process be?
6. Which is the right channel (communications technology) to use?

In a normative sense, the ability to define and answer these six questions will define the minimum requirements for project approval within the authorising environment. In addition, the appropriate articulation of answers to these questions (and consideration of any complexity, or contradictions, presented by the answers) will provide a solid foundation for the development of an effective implementation plan.

3.1.1. What is the Issue(s)?

The introduction of any engagement practice (on- or offline) will be predicated on the clear articulation of any information deficit(s) within the organisation, or government, as a whole. However, this is not always the case, even though it is essential to any consideration of the shape and nature of the issue, or issues, under consideration and will be instructive in shaping an appropriate eEngagement strategy.

Three examples of areas requiring careful consideration[1] of the policy issue under review include:

- where the introduction of eEngagement is being specifically undertaken because of limited public participation in the work of an organisation generally. In this example, it will be important for the project team to ascertain the range of policy questions that will form the subject matter for ongoing consultative processes. A good example of this is the introduction of centralised institutional online consultation tools (where the objective is to establish an ongoing online community or reference group for the organisation), with the expectation that a series of policy issues will be fed through this mechanism on an ongoing or regular basis; or

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[1] Through techniques such as concept mapping, brainstorming, or idea writing.

- where the particular policy issue under consideration has been handed to the agency by a superordinate body and the agency has been tasked with the process of implementing a consultation process, but has limited control over the capacity to define the issue under review. In this example, the implementing agency may conclude that the issue has greater levels of complexity than the scope of the brief. In such cases, if the agency is unable to receive authorisation for an adjustment to the issue definition provided, (which may be the result of a Parliamentary reference, stem from a electoral commitment or reflect party policy, or due to the proclivities of an individual manager or Minister), the inherent limitations of the issue definition will have to be countered by careful consultative design. A classic example of this problem is where superficial phenomena are specified for consultation, but the agency has been forbidden to examine deeper causal, or contributing, factors due to political sensitivities; or
- where the nature of the issue itself will – to greater or lesser degree – determine the form taken by the consultation process. Examples include:
  - where the particular area of public policy has been captured by a small 'insider' group and there is explicit recognition that participation needs to be broadened through a mechanism which limits the capacity of one organisation to dominate the participatory process;
  - where the policy area has been subject to considerable disputation leading to the development of a polarised set of stakeholders and there is a desire to reconcile these tensions;
  - where the Executive has specified a particular outcome for the process, such as clearly articulated organisational mission statements, community-designed performance targets, or a single jointly-authored final report; or
  - where there are low levels of public understanding of the issue, its nature and/or causal factors and the participatory process necessitates a period of community education prior to data collection or deliberation.

3.1.2. Who is the Audience(s)?

The nature of a policy issue will define the audience or audiences for any engagement activity. A clear understanding of the policy issue can assist in the indentification of a target group and assist understanding of the characteristics of the target audience, leading to:

- a clear understanding of the likely expectations of the target audience in the participatory process;
- their level of understanding of the policy issue;
- appreciation of the issue background, including areas of tension and conflict which need to be presented in context and possibly with care and attention to partisan sensibilities;

- an appropriate approach to *message development,* possibly requiring direct contribution from competing stakeholders;
- some indication of preferred communications channels to reach the audience(s); and
- likely responses to different models of consultation.

In many circumstances, this will simply require an appropriate period of reflection about the characteristics of groups with whom the agency has had interactions in the past, while some consultative activities may require that specific market research be undertaken to develop an appropriate classification ('market segmentation' approach).

Key questions to consider are:

- is there a single community that can be defined as having internal coherence (e.g. members of the group consider themselves to represent a community)?
  - if so, what are the characteristics of this community?
  - if not, how will the various types of stakeholder groups be classified?
- are there particular members of the community or stakeholders who could be identified as 'opinion leaders' or 'influentials'? [2]
  - if so, what role will these individuals play in the consultative process (do they expect to play a positive or negative role, can they speak for wider sections of their community, will they be included or excluded at all)?
- is there a single unit of analysis with regard to stakeholders to be consulted (individuals, family groups, interest groups, businesses, etc.)
- is there a latent group, [3] or groups, who may be affected by the policy issue, or potential policy responses, which will be incorporated in the consultative process?
  - if so, what are the characteristics of this group and how can this audience be recruited into the eEngagement process given their latent status?
  - at what point will this group or groups be brought into the process (for example, if the policy issue only becomes relevant to them in the event that a specific policy recommendation emerges)?

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[2] For an interesting discussion of the role of *influentials* online see: Institute for Politics, Democracy & the Internet, 2004, *Political Influentials Online in the 2004 Presidential Campaign*, Graduate School of Political Management, George Washington University, Washington DC, <http://www.ipdi.org/UploadedFiles/influentials_in_2004.pdf>

[3] Sometimes referred to as a 'potential pressure group'; Truman, David 1951, *The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion*, Knopf, New York.

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Exhibit 15: Recognising Different Audience Types in an Extensive Online Engagement Activity

In undertaking a wide-scale online consultation over the development of the new European Union Constitution, the project management team was careful to identify two types of audience:

- individual members of the public participating in referenda, at the national level, to adopt or reject the final draft; and
- interest groups and other organisations that have a stake in the development of the European Community. These included business organisations, non-profit groups, parties and *ad hoc* associations.

The resulting system developed to undertake the online consultation process, *Europa*, included two parallel consultation processes, one for individuals and the other for organisations.

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3.1.3. Consultation versus Collaboration

One aspect of citizen engagement activities that is of particular interest is the capacity for participation activities to go beyond pure consultation (data gathering and collection) to the empowerment of stakeholders and service recipients, thereby giving effect to greater, or lesser, control over the decision-making process. This is often characterised as a *conceptual continuum* between pure data gathering activities (consultative) and the complete devolution of authority to local communities (direct decision-making).

The desire for greater public control over the process is often predicated on a belief that this can result in either: (a) better decision outcomes; or (b) greater acceptance of outcomes achieved ('ownership'). This belief, which will be tested as part of the project preparation phase, reflects a recognition of alternative sources of expertise (local knowledge, 'folk' wisdom and experiential learning) over *classical* forms of expertise prized by policy analysts (theory-based knowledge, often entrenched within a scientific mode of inquiry).

This view is often articulated in conceptual models, such as the example provided in Figure 5, the articulation of a linear model starting with complete government control over the process of consultation and data gathering and builds towards complete devolution. As one moves down the spectrum, greater levels of community participation and decision-making are introduced.

Figure 5: The 'Consultation Continuum'[a]

↓ Increasing Participation	Consultation	Exclusive government decision-making, little consultation	Control Mode
		Listening, dialogue, limited consultation, no impact on decisions	Briefing Mode
		More open debate, shared analysis of problems, scope to influence decision-making	Debate Mode
		Joint agreement on solutions, strong potential to influence decision-making	Consensus Mode
		Joint decision-making with regards to implementation and policy	Coordination Mode
	Partnerships	Participation in design and delivery of programs and services	Operational Partnership
		Shared decision-making in policy development and program / service design and delivery	Collaborative Partnership
	Devolution	Transfer of responsibility for program / service design and delivery	Devolution

[a] Sourced from Clarkson, Beverley and Rigon, Joanne 1998, *Consultation Practices: Departmental Overview*, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, Ottawa.

3.1.3.1. Implications of the Continuum

While this (and similar) 'consultation continuum' models[4] (see Appendix A: Policy Cycle Engagement Model) are valuable in allowing public sector managers to consider engagement processes that include greater control by participants over outcomes, this conceptualisation can be criticised for implying a normative progression from consultative processes, through to collaborative approaches, to direct decision-making by members of the consultative group.

In addition, while these models are useful in that they introduce the notion of direct and deliberative democracy to public consultative processes, (long overlooked and excluded from agency planning), it needs to be recognised that the movement from consultation to devolution, or local decision-making, involves both:

- a radical shift from traditional approaches to public engagement. The nature of the issue and audience, combined with the expectations of senior decision-makers, will be significant in determining the degree to which the engagement process is consultative or collaborative in character; and
- very different approaches to the management of the activity. As per the discussion in section 2.3, Three Management Approaches, the role of the delivery agency, as one moves from consultation to participation, progresses from a steering, to a cultivating and listening approach.

Often, the implication is that, as one progresses towards more participatory approaches, the level of 'democracy' increases. However, this can be problematic if the engagement process is not representative, or where deliberative processes

[4] For example see the simplified model in Coleman and Gøtze's *Bowling Together*. The full reference is included in *Further Reading*.

have the capacity to move significant sectors of the wider community to a new policy position that differs signifcantly from 'popular opinion'.

3.1.3.2. Reconceptualising Consultation and Collaboration

The 'consultation continuum' is also limited by its single axis of analysis. The degree to which participants can be active in making decisions regarding the consultative process needs to be considered when making choices about consultation versus collaboration.

Figure 6,[5] sets out a two axis model. The first axis takes account of the continuum illustrated in Figure 5, while the second introduces the notion of control over the interactive environment (the process by which the consultative or deliberative activity will occur).

Figure 6: Consultation and Collaboration
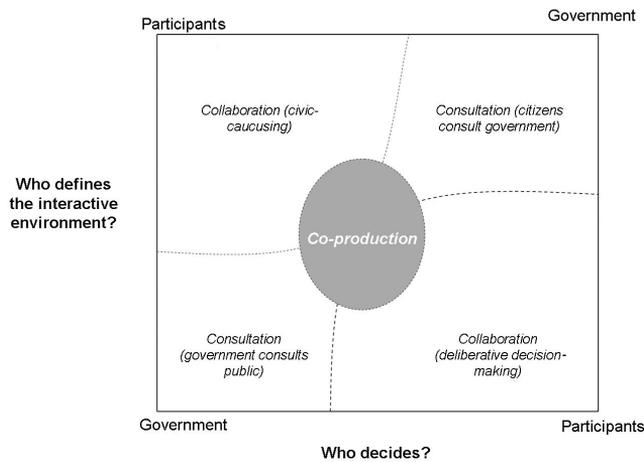
Adapted from Arnstein, Sherry 1969, 'A Ladder of Citizen Participation', *Journal of the American Planning Association*, vol. 35, no. 4, pp. 216-224.

Using this approach it is possible to envisage an engagement process that focuses on a range of consultation and collaboration aspects. This allows control, even when a key decision-maker or agency may be cautious about including significant *decision-making* capacity within the consultation process. In this case, the desire for community control can be incorporated through providing flexibility to participants to determine the *structure and processes* of the consultative environment. The advantages and limitations of this approach are illustrated in Figure 7. What must be remembered is that the selection of collaborative over

[5] Adapted from Arnstein, Sherry 1969, 'A Ladder of Citizen Participation', *Journal of the American Planning Association*, vol. 35, no. 4, pp. 216-224.

consultative approaches marks a departure from common practice and will normally require significant justification or motivation (commonly either a response to ongoing policy failure on the part of government, or the need for a 'clean slate' over contested issues).

Figure 7: Comparative Benefits of Consultation versus Collaboration

		Advantages	Limitations
Consultation	Government-led	Control over the process allows for an orderly collection of public points of view in a timeframe which can be identified and planned in advance. This is useful where the issue is both well-defined and requires a quick response from government	Unsuited to issues where the problem is ill-defined or where it is difficult to determine in advance how members of the community will respond to the request for participation. This approach is unsuited to consultative processes that require mediated outcomes, or have the objective of developing consensus or community-building outputs
Consultation	Citizen-led	Allowing participants to define the process by which information will be gathered for decision-making by government is a useful means to empower participants without the Executive feeling decision-making or control has been lost. This approach can be useful in developing trust and also motivating high levels of community participation in the process	Allowing community control over the development of the consultative process can create problems in three areas: (a) loss of control over consultation timeframe; (b) community may have limited expertise in organising participatory approach; and (c) can attract criticism of 'talking about talking'
Collaboration	Government-led	Allows public decision-making over aspects of policy preference within a structure controlled by the agency. This can be useful in ensuring that the process maintains timeframe and boundary controls (e.g. does not spill outside the agency's remit or area of expertise) while high levels of citizen participation are fostered	Agency can be criticised for manipulating outcomes by controlling decision-making process
Collaboration	Citizen-led	Can be highly democratic, the ability of the participants to define the process and outcomes can be very attractive and useful in redefining areas of particular contestation	Expensive, requires representative selection of participants and delegated authority for direct decision-making by key decision-makers in government (such as ministerial endorsement). Limited control over processes and outcomes can create the perception of significant risks, particularly if process becomes 'hijacked'
Co-decision	Shared control	Shared decision-making over process and outcomes by government and non-government participants can create balanced decision-making which incorporates the views of key stakeholders (desires) with an understanding of implementation capabilities, budgetary constraints, etc of public servants (grounded decision-making against capabilities). Can be useful for ongoing managerial relationships	Often difficult to establish (particularly to ensure a genuine balance of authority and decision-making between government and community), appropriate selection of community participants can be manipulated or contested, skills / interest in the relevant stakeholders community for ongoing participation may be limited or absent

In making the final selection of a preferred approach, it is important to consider:

- the benefits of delegation versus consultation, as per Figure 7;
- the willingness of Executive, or elected, decision-makers to delegate and maintain commitment to delegated outcomes, particularly on politically-contentious or difficult outcomes. This aspect of the choice of deliberative and collaborative approaches is particularly critical, as the failure to act on decisions made in collaborative processes can be particularly toxic to public trust in government;
- the effectiveness of the selected approach in shifting the level of the policy debate (tone, types of participants), versus other means to achieve these outcomes (widening public debate, using third party organisations etc.); and
- the response of existing 'insiders' or beneficiaries. One of the particular difficulties of engaging the public through more direct decision-making models is the reaction of insider groups whose responses can include boycotting and active resistance to the process.

3.1.4. Setting Objectives

Establishing documented (and published) objectives for the eEngagement process is a necessary primary step in the development of the implementation plan. Where possible, the objectives articulated early in the process will be the basis for evaluation measures used in the latter stages.

Objectives are likely to develop or shift over time, (particularly where the process is citizen-led, or collaborative across agencies). In general terms, however, objectives may be:

- broad in nature, possibly reflecting a 'community building' or 'visioning' approach, in which the development of a conversation, or dialogue, amongst participants represents an end in itself. Often, these types of objectives are the most rewarding form of eEngagement activity and result in a tangible and durable, outcome. That said, these types of projects also commonly require considerable planning and coordination, and can, therefore, be complex to develop and administer effectively. eEngagement activities that have broad objectives are at risk of difficulties associated with:
  - matching outcome metrics with performance;
  - maintaining momentum over time; and
  - ensuring ongoing support from senior management and Ministers, who are focused on electoral cycle timeframes; or,
- Narrowly-focused or *instrumental* in nature ('problem resolution') and, therefore, easier to develop and assess. Given the short-term nature of these activities, managers must be cautious of:
  - accusations of limited cost effectiveness;

- problems maintaining ongoing commitment to the eEngagement approach following project completion;
- difficulties maintaining staff and skills in the agency; and
- 'flash' effects (outcome measures) that have limited medium to long term public value.

The articulation of objectives is best undertaken in a clustered manner, particularly where objectives may not be equally amenable to later evaluation. While there is a common desire across government to focus on outcome (over output) measures of productivity and success, this is not always possible and well designed objectives will allow substitution of relevant activity measures for missing outcome data.

3.1.5. Degree of Interactivity

One of the most compelling characteristics of new media for the purposes of public engagement is the use of interactive technologies. Interactivity, in this context, refers to the ability of the consultation process (human aspects) or system (technological aspects) to respond to the actions of the user and vary from a heavily pre-determined process to one that is more flexible.

In this way, the notion of interactivity also has implications for any decision about whether to make a process consultative or collaborative. Interactivity can be defined as 'to act mutually; to perform reciprocal acts' and can reflect:

- the humanising aspect of technology: the way technology responds to the user in a dynamic manner, accommodating their input and/or preferences; and
- the nature of the eEngagement processes as flexible and user directed, or a pre-determined process.

The desire to create user-friendly technologies, together with the type of eEngagement processes being undertaken, will determine the level of interactivity required and desired. This, in turn, will shape the choice of technology used.

Most digital technologies are interactive to some degree. Even relatively limited channels (2G mobile telephone networks, interactive television, menu-driven 'static' DVD videodisks, etc.) provide a great deal of flexibility in terms of the interactivity inherent in the engagement process.

In the eEngagement process, it is common to think of interactivity as a technical characteristic. However, the interactivity of an eEngagement system is commonly the result of deliberative design to incorporate interaction between participants, either vertically (between the participants and the agency), horizontally (between participants), or both.

Exhibit 16: Comparative Interactivity of Two Online Petition Systems

A good comparative example of horizontal and vertical interaction is to compare the parliamentary petitions systems of Queensland (Australia) and the Parliament of Scotland. Both systems provide access to the traditional petition system of their Parliaments, where members of the community can express their view on any issue to the Parliament.

However the two systems differ considerably in their level of interactivity. The Queensland system (http://www.parliament.qld.gov.au/view/EPetitions%5FQLD/) permits members of the public to sign the petition only – a singular direct interaction with the petition system. The Scottish system (http://epetitions.scottish.parliament.uk/) provides a similar mechanism, but also includes the ability for petitioners to discuss the issue amongst themselves through a moderated online forum that is part of the petitions website.

In thinking about what role interactivity can play in the development of the eEngagement process, consider five types of interactivity:

- *synchronous versus asynchronous* interaction: is the process to be conducted in real-time (live) like a public meeting (with the advantages of spontaneity) or will participation be staged over time (allowing greater participation for people without the ability to commit a 'block' of time, or allowing a more wide-ranging debate, discussion, or voting process?
- the number of iterations of interaction: what will the 'intensity' of the interaction be? Will it be a series of small interactions, or only a small number of more intense interactions over time? The advantage of the former approach is the extent, range and free-flowing nature of the process, the latter can exhibit a tendency for high-volume participants to 'drown out' other voices;
- the level of interaction between users: is there an explicit desire among participants to have a dialogue, or interaction, with each other? This may be useful where the desire is to stimulate (not lead) a discussion or debate, or in deliberative processes where the participants are tasked with presenting their points of view and arguing these towards a voting process. On the other hand, where there may be particular risks to participants (see section 4.6, Managing Risk) or, where data collection only is required, interaction of this type may be counter-productive;
- interaction between different channels: where multiple channels are involved, (or participants split between sub-groups, as in a deliberative conference), one of the core questions may be the cost-benefit of allowing discussion or interaction across these channels. In some cases this may be highly desirable,

(e.g. where there is a recognition that different channels will attract different types of participants and the motivation for the eEngagement project is inter-group learning). On the other hand, splitting groups into selected clusters, or teams, can be valuable in moving people out of entrenched positions supported by their peer groups and lead to deeper interactions between individuals;

- inclusion of elected representatives in the process: this is often one of the more difficult questions to resolve and is highly dependent on the nature of the issue under review and the hosting organisation. In many cases this may represent only token endorsement of the process (e.g. the Ministerial greeting), in others, elected representatives may be a core part of the process, using the project to supplement and enhance their interactions with the community. [6] On the other hand, some consultation units recognise risks in this option, including:
  - the prominence of the individual will detract from public participation;
  - the elected representative may dominate, or hijack, the process to promote a personal viewpoint, or reiterate party/government policy to the exclusion of debate; or
  - the process being used by a partisan group to 'score points' (e.g. through 'stacking' the forum).

Overall, three questions need to be answered:

- how much interactivity is *needed*?
- how much interaction does the audience *want*?
- how much interaction can other participants (councillors or members of Parliament, moderating or management staff of the agency) *realistically* commit to?

As always, the answer often reflects a compromise between these competing forces.

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[6] The online discussion forum previously run at Moreland City Council in Melbourne was specifically implemented by a Councillor for this purpose.

> **Exhibit 17: SMS Voting – Australia versus the United Kingdom**
>
> In the recent extensive pilot of remote voting systems in the United Kingdom, SMS voting was used as one of a number of channels for the voting process (internet, electronic voting booths, paper ballots, postal, mobile telephones). In this example, SMS was seen as particularly valuable in reaching the youth demographic, given a good fit between this channel and that audience. While this was valuable in the UK, the use of compulsory preferential voting systems (and the need to be able to decipher a long ballot paper and navigate it easily) employed in Australia makes this channel of little value.

3.1.6. Choosing the Right Channel(s)

Following consideration of the issues raised above, the selection of the most appropriate channel moves (hopefully) from being a complex technical assessment process, to one where the manager can discriminate between differing engagement needs and balance these against different characteristics (strengths) of various technical options.

The core questions during this phase of the planning process are:

- what are the available technical options?
- what are their characteristics?
- how do these match the audience needs?
- how do these reflect the objectives of the project?
- to what extent do they afford the degree and type of interactivity required?

Different target audiences will have higher levels of familiarity with different communications channels than others. A good illustration of this is the way different generations use technologies, like mobile telephones. While older people generally treat these as portable analogues of the landline telephones they grew up with (predominately using voice), younger people are more likely (for a range of reasons, including cost) to demonstrate a higher ratio of SMS to voice using the same technology.

While any generalisations must be treated sceptically, there is a general tendency for people to develop *information literacy*,[7] technical expertise and confidence in communications technologies (and specific submedia or applications[8]) and

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[7] Defined by the US National Forum on Information Literacy as 'the ability to know when there is a need for information, to be able to identify, locate, evaluate and effectively use that information for the issue or problem at hand'.

[8] Here it is important to separate technologies and applications. Example 1: a technology may be a telephone, but have a number of applications (one-to-one voice calls, conference calling, chat lines). Example 2: the Internet is primarily a specific form of networking, but has a wide array of applications (submedia) that often share little functional similarity (web browsing, e-mail, P2P, online gaming, IRC,

software during particular stages of their lifecycle: as they reach adulthood, during their years of formal education and/or the onset of professional employment. This may explain why your parents enjoy media you find uninteresting, while your children enjoy media you find incomprehensible.

Exhibit 18: SMS Consultation

Lancashire County Council uses SMS messages to prompt members of the community for quick responses to a range of questions under consideration. The popularity of SMS, particularly among younger people, provides the Council with the opportunities to target particular elements of the wider community. As the communication channel employed has specific characteristics that limit verbose participation (tending to generate fast feedback, but with short responses), it is useful for a specific type of engagement process (educational and idea generation), but is unsuited for more complex policy issues. See: http://www.lancashire.gov.uk/environment/sms/index.asp

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The important point to remember is that selecting the right communications channel can significantly influence the type of participants likely to be attracted to the process. This can sometimes be beneficial, especially if the aim is to achieve segmentation (such as the use of chat for younger people), however, if the aim is to capture a wide cross-section of the community:

• broad-brush applications are preferable (email, web-based participation, mobile telephony); or
• multiple applications (channels) will need to be employed.

One of the ongoing strengths of ICTs is the growing convergence of different types of communication applications upon a standard internet protocol that is becoming increasingly available across a wide array of devices.

We can expect to see decreasing costs associated with the incorporation of multiple channels within a single system, or approach, over coming years – making broad-based strategies more cost-effective. The trend towards convergence will also be valuable in reducing administrative costs (for example, seeing web-based interaction and mobile telephone participation served by the same database and management system).

3.2. Concept Development Approach

Depending upon the scope and scale of the issue, the tractability of the participatory problem and the importance of the policy development process,

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etc.). Thus, a user may be regarded as technically proficient in one application of a technology, but not another.

the establishment of a project team and development of an eEngagement approach can occur quickly, or represent a stand-alone consultative process in its own right.

Exhibit 19: 'Full Service' Commercial eEngagement Providers

A number of private firms have begun to offer electronic research and consultation services, including the capacity to provide 'full service' provision of electronic consultations from conceptualisation through to implementation.

These providers can be useful where a public organisation may:

- lack the skills needed to undertake planning and implementation;
- be only interested in a one-off process and uninterested in developing organisational skills and infrastructure;
- look to partner with existing providers in the early days of developing eEngagement capabilities to increase their speed of learning; and/or
- be interested in a specific technology provided by a private firm.

Some examples of these types of providers would include:

- Insightrix, an online research and consultation service provider [http://www.insightrix.com/];
- Ezicomms, a provider of handheld devices which allow for interactive 'town hall' meetings [http://www.ezicomms.com/];
- BigPulse, a provider of 'online opinion markets' [http://www.bigpulse.com/];
- Securevote, a specialist provider of secure online voting systems [http://www.securevote.com.au/];
- Everyone Counts, a company that develops and provides online surveys, polls and elections [http://www.everyonecounts.com/];
- National Forum, a non-profit organisation with experience in developing interactive websites for government and political organisations [http://portal.nationalforum.com.au/]; and
- Social Change Online, another non-profit organisation that develops web-based services and provides moderation staff for public enterprises [http://online.socialchange.net.au/].

The combination of: (a) a relatively simple or straightforward policy issue, and (b) a clear fit between a target audience and particular channel, may encourage a relatively rapid concept development process. However, the establishment of any eEngagement process requires lateral and creative thinking in order to

anticipate and consider the range of alternative approaches. The tendency for some online consultation and democracy projects to overemphasise available tool sets can sometimes lead to a process driven by available technologies, at the expense of approaches that might yield a better outcome.

Examples of concept development approaches (from the simple to the highly complex) include:

- in-house development only;
- co-operative public sector development (agency plus intra-governmental stakeholders);
- *ad hoc* community consultation (liaison, often with loose timeframes; 'ring around');
- Request-for-Information (RFI) consultation (formal, submission timeframes and loose expected format);
- formal consultative approach (release of documentation, *pro forma* submission templates, etc.);
- working / planning / brainstorming day(s);
- workshops and road shows;
- use of an external research service; and
- a combination of the above approaches (as illustrated in Figure 8).

Figure 8: Complex Concept Development Process (Australian Tax Office)[a]

Issue	Discover	Invent	Evaluate	Survey
'How does the organisation respond to the community?' (benchmarking current performance)	User clinics to understand issues (focus group approach)	Creative retreats (intensive brain-storming and idea generation)	User observation tests of prototypes	Post implementation survey
Time →				

[a] Adapted from: Vivian, Raelene 2004, *Elements of Good Government Community Collaboration*, Discussion paper no. 2, Australian Government Information Management Office, Canberra, <http://www.agimo.gov.au/publications/2004/05/egovt_challenges/community/collaboration>

3.3. Managing Identity Issues

One issue that all eEngagement processes face is that of the identity of participants in the process. While it is often difficult (or unnecessary) to determine the identity of individuals in *physical* meetings, the capacity for people to participate using ICTs from any location gives rise to public sector managers' concerns about the potential for misrepresentation in the eEngagement process. Depending on the process being developed, this may be a significant issue (e.g. for an electronic voting system), or of little or no consequence (such as when collecting *ad hoc* comments online for a minor issue).

At the level of technical management, however, managing identity in online participation can be one of the most complex and difficult areas of

decision-making associated with developing eEngagement approaches. The issue of identity has two dimensions:

- desirability and notions of eligibility; and
- technical aspects of identification (proof).

3.3.1. Desirability of Identification

The desirability of identity management for online systems is the first question that needs to be addressed in development of any approach to managing personal information in the online consultative, or participative process. The primary question that needs to be addressed here is, whether there is some basis for *exclusion* from the participatory process.

This may appear, on the surface, to reflect a negative approach, however, the question is underpinned by the following considerations:

- is there some legal, socio-cultural, or moral restriction to be placed on participation and why? This may include examples where:
  - the issue relates to a local area, with implications restricted to that area alone;
  - participation is a right of citizenship only;
  - there are concerns about age of consent issues for participation;
  - the issue concerns current recipients of a service;
  - the eEngagement process has been designed to specifically counteract under-representation of a minority group;
- there is a practical reason associated with the restriction (such as limiting participation numbers). This may be the case where the issue is popular and would attract a large number of non-affected 'hangers on';
- the audience has been specifically selected to adhere to a particular mix of characteristics (e.g. quota sampling) and free access to participation would undermine this approach; and/or
- the issue is particularly sensitive and is being carried out in a highly controlled and managed environment.

While it may appear obvious that entry into the process will be controlled, it is not always clear that restrictions on participation need to be enforced. Exclusion from a participation process can be difficult to justify to affected persons or stakeholder groups, particularly if:

- participation is restricted, but the planners failed to identify a relevant stakeholder group prior to the 'rules' being developed;
- the process is not binding in nature; and/or
- if benefits appear to accrue to persons or groups participating in the process (such as social connectedness) which are denied to others.

Overall, the question of eligibility can be broken into three levels:

- *no verification is necessary* (least common) – participation is open to all;
- *some verification is desirable* (most common) – casual or troublesome participants are discouraged by a formal registration process (self-completion); and
- *absolute verification is required* (uncommon) – the participants are specifically identified against some form of independent, or absolute, system of identification which contains their relevant proof of eligibility (e.g. electoral role, drivers' licence, etc.).

Exhibit 20: Is This a Local Issue?

In the development of a citizen-based consultative process to develop alternatives to the official World Trade Centre re-development process, the *America Speaks* project team limited participation in the online forum to people living in and around New York. The team soon received requests to participate from across the United States and while these requests were politely declined, people from outside of New York managed to find their way into the process.

When asked, these people stated that the World Trade Centre was an American issue, not one simply for residents of New York and that they had strong personal feelings about how the site was being treated following the 9/11 attacks. They implicitly questioned the eEngagement managers notions of who had 'legitimacy' to participate in debate surrounding the redevelopment of what would be an iconic national project.

They were allowed to take part.

One of the important issues to remember in this early phase of decision-making, is how restrictions on participation (or the lack thereof) shape outcomes. In some circumstances, it may be considered necessary to apply *controls* whilst not discouraging broader participation. In such cases, a two-step process may be required that allows open participation in more 'general' forums, on the one hand (such as participation in a discussion forum), with restricted participation in *deliberative* forums (targeting individuals or groups falling under a specific category [citizens], or though a secondary sampling system, such as delegation to a group of elected spokespersons).

3.3.2. Technical Aspects of Identification

Following the determination of the necessary levels of eligibility and identity verification, the next question (and one which will shape the technology used for the consultative process), will pertain to the technical means by which

identification can be assessed (either to manage access to the system, or as part of the pre-participation approval process).

Exhibit 21: Using 'Cookies'

While some computers have a fixed internet address which allows websites to identify them on an ongoing basis, most computers do not, making it difficult to identify a user from one visit to the next. To manage this difficulty many websites use 'cookies'. A cookie is a small computer file placed on a user's hard drive to record data about a previous visits to the website or service. The cookie allows a computer to be identified and information stored about that computer's activities. Cookies can be useful in:

- storing preferences about how webpages should be displayed;
- storing user identification information to allow the user to 'automatically' log into a web service;
- retain a memory of the user's activities or pages visited; and
- developing a usage pattern for users to improve the service or information structure.

While these advantages are significant, there are also problems associated with this approach:

- some users will not accept or use cookies, either because of concerns about privacy, because the computer they use is unable to accept them, or because they use a shared computer (such as a public access terminal);
- while some users secure their computer by using a personal password, not all do – authenticating via cookie only authenticates the *computer,* not the person using it. Allowing a cookie to automatically authenticate a user may allow a third party to impersonate the user; and
- cookies can identify websites that have been visited by the user, this may be undesirable if the issue is sensitive or the user is at risk (e.g. a consultation associated with family violence).

These technical questions are best undertaken in direct consultation with security and IT staff and must, at least, include consideration of:

- the existing infrastructure surrounding identity in your agency (and the distribution of tokens, passwords, or similar systems to potential participants);
- existing authentication technologies (e.g. public key infrastructure); and
- the necessity to develop technical separation from token to identity.

This last point is particularly relevant where the administering agency uses pre-existing information about the participant and uses this to collect policy-related or personal information. In this case, privacy legislation will require physical or electronic separation between the corporate knowledge used to provide secure entry into a system and the information provided by individuals during the eEngagement process.

In addition, careful consideration of this approach will be necessary where the eEngagement process requires both user *validation* and user *anonymity*. This can mean either complete anonymity throughout the whole process, or levels thereof – such as anonymity within a discussion forum (between members of the public), but where the agency has the capacity to identify and follow-up on specific participants.

Overall, online identity management – to greater or lesser degrees – depends on issues that are outside the control of the agency (such as the ability of the users to ensure that they have a secure computing environment, or their capacity to remember and keep passwords secret, etc.).

While an agency may develop a robust security and identify verification approach, this can be undermined by users themselves. Security and identity supervision is about risk management and reducing the *probability* associated with fraud or impersonation.