

Preface

The objective of this guide is to equip public sector managers to assess the value that new communications and computing technology may bring to their interactions with a range of potential stakeholders. It is written for managers who have an interest in expanding their approach to public engagement, rather than information technology professionals.

Over the last 20 years, advanced communication technologies, like computer networks and mobile telephones, have become pervasive throughout Western society. These technologies have not only revolutionised the delivery of public and private services, they have shaped consumers' expectations about service quality. These technologies can also play an important role in assisting public sector managers to consult, involve and engage members of the community in the development, implementation, management and evaluation of public policy.

This guide focuses on 'electronic engagement', which we might define as: 'the use of Information Communication Technologies by the public sector to improve, enhance and expand the engagement of the public in policy-making processes'.

This monograph does not advocate a specific methodology for electronic engagement. There is no single model that guarantees effective eEngagement. Instead, this guide emphasises the need to select, or develop a methodology that optimises four factors: *issue, audience, technology* and *timeframe*.

The incredible flexibility of new technologies provides the progressive public sector manager with a wide array of options for expanding their consultative and decision-making processes with key stakeholders. Public sector managers, however, need to consider a number of practical issues, including which approaches to electronic engagement are most appropriate to: (a) different management styles or roles; or (b) different points in the policy cycle. In so doing, managers might be well advised to catalogue the range of potential methodologies in a way that clearly sets out their advantages and limitations.

As a starting point for the development of an electronic engagement strategy, the guide discusses:

- motivations and reasons for expanding existing engagement strategies to incorporate new technologies;
- problems of definition and conceptualisation of these ideas, against the wider backdrop of the 'information society' and emerging 'electronically-facilitated democracies'; and
- management considerations, from initiation, development and implementation, to post-implementation review and assessment.

The guide includes a range of examples and references to other relevant manuals.