

GOVERNING TECHNOLOGY: 10 WAYS TO CONNECT WITH CITIZENS

If you think this new era in government is all about openness and transparency, you'd be right -- and wrong. It's not *just* about transparency, said Beth Noveck, the new deputy director for open government in President Obama's Office of Science and Technology. It's also about opening the way for citizens to engage and collaborate with government and to help make policy, she told a meeting of state technology officials in Baltimore last week.



This newsletter is written by *Governing's* Ellen Perlman. Got an idea? Contact us at techletter@governing.com.

The president has called for a government of "unprecedented openness," Noveck noted at the National Association of State Chief Information Officers midyear meeting. And government has a long way to go. Too many government Web sites fall short on citizen engagement and fail to offer ways for the public to collaborate with officials to solve problems.

Offering mechanisms to complain merely allows people to "bitch about problems" without engaging them to act, Noveck said, and on sites where citizens pledge to help with causes, people's actions are "divorced from action by government itself." Sites such as [FixMyStreet](#) and [MyBikeLane](#) create opportunities for collaboration between government and citizens she said, but not in the area of policymaking.

Noveck cited the [City Scan project](#) in Hartford, Connecticut, as an example of the type of interaction she's pushing. Sponsored by the Connecticut Policy and Economic Council, that project gave Hartford residents a way to prioritize their concerns -- such as graffiti or drug paraphernalia in parks -- pushing city hall to focus on the issues they believed were the most important or aggravating, not just the ones local officials thought should be highest on the agenda.

So how should state and local governments come up with these collaborative Web sites and use social networks for better decision making and performance outcomes? Noveck knows a little something about that. As a [professor at New York Law School](#), she created the [Democracy Design Workshop](#) and its "Do Tank," which she describes as a "legal R&D lab" for lawyers to work on collaboration

and technology issues. Noveck also is the author of ["Wiki Government: How Technology Can Make Government Better, Democracy Stronger, and Citizens More Powerful."](#)

Based on that work, the White House official offered her state-level colleagues **10 design principles for civic engagement**:

Ask the right questions. Governments often ask for feedback, but nothing more. What they get back is an "undifferentiated mass" of information -- much of it garbage or random information, and not particularly useful. It's better to ask targeted questions seeking specific feedback. When the White House recently asked six questions on its blog, it got dozens of useful responses. "Not thousands," Noveck said. "We don't want thousands."

Ask the right people. Create opportunities for the right people to participate. No one institution or agency is likely to have all the skills necessary to do its tasks. A "diverse social toolbox" can come to governments' aid, Noveck said.

Noveck mentioned the U.S. Patent Office's ["Peer to Patent" project](#). Traditionally the patent office gives one person the responsibility to figure out whether an invention merits a patent -- "a single point of failure," as Noveck called it. The "Peer to Patent" project helps that patent officer quickly tap the brainpower of other volunteer experts who have relevant knowledge in science and technology.

As another example, Noveck cited [InnoCentive](#) -- a private, eight-year-old "global network of over 160,000 of the world's brightest problem solvers" that helps public, corporate, non-profit and academic organizations solve problems.

Design the process for the desired end. Last fall, the [Commission on Presidential Debates](#) asked voters to submit questions for one of the presidential debates. The commission got questions, all right -- 25,000 of them. Moderator Tom Brokaw had to pick just a handful.

What if, instead, an audience had pre-selected 25 questions from those 25,000? Noveck calls it ["Digg style instead of wiki style"](#) -- a reference to a social bookmarking site that lets readers vote on and rank their favorite news stories. Using rating and ranking tools makes weeding out chaff more manageable.

Design for groups. Create processes that use the wisdom of crowds. The previously mentioned "Peer to Patent" project not only uses teams of volunteers to help review a patent application, but the volunteers work together to rate and rank each other's offerings. The group product then gets submitted, and the "community moderating" improves both the input and the output.

Use the screen. Go visual. A Google mashup map is more approachable than a dry, dull spreadsheet. It gives data meaning and power. You can read about swine flu in text form, but using a "heat map" to see the numbers and concentrations of sick people is "powerful stuff," Noveck said. The more governments can use the screen to illustrate a process, the more opportunities they create for citizen participation in it.

Assign roles and tasks. Show people what government wants them to do. Don't just ask for help. Tell people what kind of help would be useful. For example, offer an opportunity to clean a park or hand out leaflets so people can self-select according to their desires.

Build reputation. Allowing people to rate comments made by others, flag abusive comments and give a thumbs up or down helps make feedback more manageable and useful. It also informs the work of the Web site.

Make policies, not Web sites. The White House is considering ways to create better systems for gathering employee feedback, similar to ones used by the Transportation Security Administration and the State Department. Such programs route suggestions and information to the right people.

That kind of channeling process is important. Noveck noted that the Obama campaign did not have a well-developed process for managing all the comments and opinions it received online. But the campaign did have a series of policy networks in place that engaged specific people in moderated listservs. The people on those listservs created policy expertise for the campaign.

Pilot new ideas. The Obama administration has the first blog in the executive office that allows comments. There are constraints, with good reason. "Still, it's a very big step," Noveck said.

Noveck also spoke admiringly of the [Apps for Democracy](#) program started by Vivek Kundra, the former District of Columbia chief technology officer who is now the federal CIO. The D.C. government received millions of dollars worth of technology applications for \$50,000 by creating a contest and asking outsiders for ideas.

CIOs need to use their bully pulpit to push for experimentation. The White House is a long way from unleashing people who have the spirit of experimentation, but it wants to try. State and local CIOs need to do the same -- and somehow change the political mindset that failure is not permissible.

They need to find that "sweet spot," the sand box or the idea lab where it's OK to try things. It will create an expectation within the citizenry and government that there exists a place where both can try things together, try something new -- although perhaps not on the front pages of a government's Web site.

Focus on outcomes. Organizations often spend too much time focusing on inputs -- how much is spent, how much is given out in grants, how many features are on a Web site. Instead, Noveck said they should be asking, "What do we want to achieve?"

Transparency and collaboration are not goals for their own sake, she emphasized. It's nice to have data. But the point of transparency and input is to help governments make better decisions, drive better performance and hold people accountable.

Transparency drives participatory government. Or, as Noveck put it, it allows for government not only for the people or by the people, but also *with* the people.