

OMB Issues Open Government Directive

March 3, 2010 — The clock started ticking for executive-level government departments and agencies on December 8, 2009, when the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued an Open Government Directive that includes formal action deadlines on transparency, participation and collaboration. It's likely, however, individual executive-level agencies may push the same directives down to state and local governments, especially those directives that focus on information. The Obama administration's Chief Technology Officer Aneesh Chopra commented, "...we highly encourage state and local governments to consider the same directives..." and, "...we hope this will be a helpful tool" for state and local governments.

KEY POINTS

According to the Directive, the cornerstone of open government is to leverage technology to provide:

- **Transparency:** Promote accountability by providing the public with information about what the government is doing
- **Participation:** Allow members of the public to contribute ideas and expertise so their government can make policies with the benefit of information that is widely dispersed in society
- **Collaboration:** Improve government effectiveness by encouraging partnership and cooperation within the federal government, across levels of government, and between the government and private institutions

The Directive included specific deadlines for formal action, including:

- **January 22:** Identify and publish online in an open format at least three high-value data sets
- **February 6:** Create an Open Government Web page...to serve as the gateway for agency activities related to the Open Government Directive and...maintain and update that Web page in a timely fashion
- **April 7:** Develop and publish on its Open Government Web page an Open Government Plan that will describe how it will improve transparency and integrate public participation and collaboration into its activities
- **April 7:** White House issues a comprehensive strategy for federal spending transparency
- **December 8:** Target agencies reduce Freedom of Information backlogs by at least 10 percent.

While the Directive emphasizes specific deadlines for formal action, one concern is information alone does not necessarily provide the transparency required to promote accountability. The question for federal agencies (and eventually state and local level agencies that receive the funds and organizations that contribute their expertise) is will the

massive amounts of information be user-friendly and not result in a massive overload of data too cumbersome to be helpful?

The three high-value data sets referred to in the January 22 deadline (above) must be registered on the *data.gov Web site*. Data.gov was launched in May 2009 to increase public access to high-value, machine-readable datasets generated by the Executive Branch. It includes searchable data catalogs containing raw data and hyperlinks to agency datasets or Web pages. When it launched last May, data.gov contained 47 data sets. Reportedly, the number of data sets has grown to more than 100,000 today.

Private sector use of transparent information

One example of the public using information on data.gov is the new Web site *FlyOnTime.us*. The volunteer creators took advantage of the government-collected, accessible data to marry historical flight information with current weather information. *FlyOnTime* provides "... the most on-time flight between two airports or (allows you to) check how late your flight is on average, in good weather and bad, before you leave" all primarily through historical on-time performance data from the Bureau of Transportation Statistics.

Leveraging technology and keeping information secure

Not everyone will have as much success with the data found on data.gov. Just because an agency publishes downloadable data does not ensure it's in a format easily read, interpreted, combined or compared with other data (often in dissimilar formats). And each of the action steps required of executive agencies to share data will depend on effective and efficient technology initiatives.

Executive departments and agencies are required to:

- Publish government information online, expanding access by making data available online in open formats
- Improve the quality of government information, conforming to OMB guidance on quality with adequate systems and processes in place to promote such conformity
- Create and institutionalize a culture of open government, integrating various disciplines to work together to define and develop open government solutions.

Making data available, improving data quality, integrating various disciplines – each of these creates potential challenges. It's likely the Open Government Directive encourages open formats in the hope a non-vendor-specific system will offer the user-friendly features and flexibility to meet various needs through common standards. But it remains to be seen what this open system architecture will look like.

Currently, the federal government invests more than \$70 billion per year in information technology (IT). The government's IT dashboard (<http://it.usaspending.gov>) is intended to provide information on how and where the government is spending its IT dollars. It provides visibility into the operations and performance of federal IT investments and the ability for the public to provide direct feedback to those accountable. However, with the increasingly high expectations of the public and private sectors and the general public regarding how technology can support their needs and operations, there are accompanying security concerns. During the announcement of the Open Government Directive, the administration's CIO Vivek Kundra said, "We need to make sure that we have proper concerns for privacy, confidentiality and national security." At least two areas of security concern are: 1) what data is released and to whom; and 2) are the sites vulnerable to hackers looking for access to non-publicly shared data?

There is also the realization that, despite the best intentions, the Directive will result in a mountain of data too overwhelming to be useful that also leads to bandwidth issues. This is likely, particularly since an agency's Open Government Plan is supposed to "...provide(s) public information maintained in electronic format...in an open format and as granular as possible..." The objective of the granularity requirement is not to present data that has already been rolled up or summarized in a manner resulting in a conclusion to which not everyone would agree. Granularity allows each user to compile data from various government agencies and conduct their own analysis for their own purposes (per the oft-cited FlyOnTime.us).

Finally, the Open Government Directive is also meant to foster collaboration between the public sector and industry, whether federal, state or local government executives or an industry leader in the private sector.

IMPACT TO ORGANIZATIONS

In light of the new Open Government Directive, Jefferson Wells suggests the following:

- Take some time to identify any datasets available through data.gov that may be applicable to your business or industry
- Use datasets that help provide both leading and lagging indicators as you strategize your short- and long-term objectives
- Determine how data you collect within your own organization can be combined with that collected by government agencies to compare or benchmark common practices
- State and local government agency directors may want to consider how their agencies can learn from the federal directive and reduce the effort expended to respond to time-consuming requests for data or Freedom of Information Act information by making Web-based, readable, searchable data available on their own Web sites.

HOW JEFFERSON WELLS CAN HELP

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