Chapter 13

The Federal Government

Meeting The Needs Of Society In The Information Age

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Abstract: The Federal government has two roles in the information age: 1) to lead the society as we define our vision, goals, desired transformation, and strategies in light of the opportunities and newly created problems associated with information technology tools; and 2) to transform the government by becoming savvy users, key innovators and drivers of change with information technology tools.

Key words: information technology, federal government, democracy, information technology research and development, e-government

1. INTRODUCTION

Information technology is currently a revolutionary force. In many ways, it has transformed our society in the United States and has touched our nation and the world not only economically and politically, but also socially and culturally. The use of information technology tools has become pervasive and with this technology new and wonderful ideas and excitement about future possibilities have emerged as well as a complex set of policy issues. And at the core of many of these possibilities and issues is the federal government. The government is a key player in issues such as access, appropriate use, research, and organizational change. The government, especially the federal government, has found itself at the forefront of many policies, strategies, decisions, and regulations related to information technology. At the same time, the government faces the complex challenge of revolutionizing itself to make pertinent, accessible, and adaptable use of information technology tools for its own benefit and the benefit of the citizens it is designed to serve.
The challenges for the federal government range from its role in funding and doing the research necessary to help advance information technology, to helping to solve the issues of privacy and security, to figuring out its own technological needs and how to blend those with its present organizational structure. In essence, the challenge of the federal government is two-fold. First, it is a catalyst for the change that has occurred in the so-called “information age.” The government has a responsibility for helping to “manage” the transformation of society spurred by information technology tools. The government is critical to such issues as ensuring that 1) information technology tools are accessible; 2) citizens’ rights to privacy and security are not compromised; 3) the educational system can affordably use information technology tools; 4) research remains constant and futuristic; and a plethora of other issues that have and will emerge. The policy decisions associated with these issues are best accomplished with government-industry-academic-non-profit organization partnerships. Second, the government must manage its own ability to use the tools of the information age, in a timely and economically sound manner. Citizens have grown to expect that the use of technology tools be both demand-driven and user-friendly. It is an exciting, yet complex venture.

2. THE GOVERNMENT’S ROLE IN RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND POLICY IN THE INFORMATION AGE

The tools of the information age were the product of a strong federal government focus on research and development. The federal government funded most of the basic research that led to the creation of information technology tools and it is critical that the government continues to focus both on knowledge creation and funding for basic research. Technology in the National Interest notes “[f]or more than 200 years, the Federal government has played a vital role in establishing a scientific and technological infrastructure that has contributed substantially to U.S. economic growth and the competitive success of American industry.” Yet, ensuring that the federal government maintains this strong role is a constant concern. Scientists, technologists and industry leaders pay close attention to the funding source and focus of basic research. The Government plays a balancing act with limited resources, realizing both the importance of providing funding for the nation’s short-term needs and desires as well as realizing the need to plan and provide for the long-term. It is a difficult issue,