



Community Connection

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It's time for politics to stop halting our technological process



By Scot Rourke, the Knight Center of Digital Excellence

As communities plan ways to spend federal stimulus money – such as in healthcare, education and public safety – let's not forget the need to invest in the equally important job of automating government itself.

During my recent visit to Seoul, South Korea, I saw households with better digital infrastructure than some of our biggest businesses in the United States. I saw video distance learning with one teacher and one student running a camera in an empty classroom – and hundreds of thousands of kids watching online for free. I saw hundreds of government services conducted via remote, from a TV with a standard set-top box – no computer required.

What's more, the South Korean government tracks customer, I mean citizen, satisfaction. All the while, taxpayer costs are plummeting, enabling a combination of lower taxes and increased investment in education and innovation.

If our citizens could see what I have seen, they would accept nothing less.

Yet here, we see just the opposite as politicians limit progress by competing with each other along party lines, instead of each competing on behalf of our country to keep us sharp on a global stage.

The paradox within American government is that while elected officials tout innovation in business and other sectors, their own political interests are better served by keeping government stuck in the past with a bloated public payroll.

Think about it. If government leverages technology for greater productivity, jobs stand to be lost through automation. For elected politicians, that means fewer patronage jobs – a source of both votes and campaign volunteers. It's machine politics, and it's old school and foolish in the new economy.

The funny thing: When it comes to applying technology to elections, savvy politicians understand the advantages of new technologies in raising campaign funds. President Obama is called the "Internet President" for how he raised money online. His campaign success is indeed a brilliant illustration of how a candidate can touch millions online for practically no cost.

All of government should operate on the same premise: applying technology to touch and serve millions for little cost.

Looking around in my own region and across the country, I don't see it happening. In Northeast Ohio, our marketplace includes more than four million people and two cities with a population of well over 100,000 people. Not one city or school district currently has a Chief Information Officer. Some of these municipalities and school districts are enterprises of more than a half-billion dollars a year. Yet no one is in charge of planning how technology can improve public services, not to mention how we might collaborate for greater efficiency.

With the stimulus funding, we now have unprecedented opportunity for transformation across sectors, including schools, hospitals, and safety forces. Rather than proceed with plans to spend a third of the nearly \$800 million in stimulus money on state budget gaps, wouldn't taxpayers gain more by carefully planned investment in 21st-century approaches?

One challenge for President Obama is to hold out a vision so Americans can see that our very competitiveness as a nation is at stake.

It is also up to Obama to ensure that federal agencies award stimulus money to projects that improve our global competitiveness.

Out of this economic crisis we have great promise. The opportunity, if we seize it, is to transform government and all sectors that feed our economy. Decisions we make now will determine the legacy we leave to our children. We already mortgaged our children's future. Now, if we want them to thank us for the investment, we need bold bipartisan action to transform our economy.

Scot Rourke is President and CEO of the Cleveland-based technology nonprofit OneCommunity, which operates the Knight Center of Digital Excellence in partnership with The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. To learn more about the Knight Center, go to www.knightcenter.org or e-mail info@knightcenter.org.