DRAFT: Guidelines and Checklist for Online Consultation and Citizen Engagement

Given the rapid evolution of technology and continuing changes in the online government environment, the guidelines in this Appendix of the *Consultation and Citizen Engagement Policy of the Government of Canada* are to be viewed as a work-in-progress.

Their purpose is to support public service managers in the use of new information technologies for consulting and engaging Canadians. Intended primarily for policy, program and service managers – though they also apply to managers of information technology – the guidelines are organized in four parts:

1. The first section outlines operating principles and key considerations for the planning and implementation of online consultation and citizen engagement processes.

2. Section two describes the five stages of an online consultation or citizen engagement process and provides an easy reference checklist that summarizes the critical tasks for each stage. (Note: This section is to be read in conjunction with the *Consultation and Citizen Engagement Guidelines and Checklist* provided in *Appendix A* of this policy.)

3. Section three, an assessment of online tools and their application, provides guidance on selecting the right technology to address specific online consultation or engagement objectives.

4. The fourth section provides an overview of legislation and Government of Canada policies and guidelines related to online activities. Examples of online consultation and citizen engagement practices from Canada and abroad, as well as other reference materials, complete this section.

The guidelines reflect the growing impact of new information technologies on the relationship between government and citizens, particularly in the involvement of citizens and stakeholder organizations in the development of public policies, programs, services and initiatives. New information technologies will continue to influence the nature of government-citizen relations. And while they hold much promise, such technologies should be viewed as *enablers,* not as substitutes for good governance.

Electronic consultation and engagement tools are still in the early developmental stages within the Government of Canada and thus are generally considered a *complement* to other more traditional and 'offline' approaches. The guidelines that follow are meant to encourage and support further development and activity in this area – to help build knowledge and capacity throughout the Public Service.

1. Operating Principles and Key Considerations

Online consultation – for the purpose of these guidelines – refers to a process by which the government creates opportunities for citizens to provide feedback and input on a particular issue, using the Internet. Inviting public input using an online form, responding to questions in an online poll, or submitting questions or concerns via email are examples of online consultation.

Online engagement refers to a process by which the government provides opportunities for citizens to engage in an interactive *dialogue* on a particular policy or issue. Unlike the one-way direction of feedback in online consultations, online citizen engagement provides opportunities for the public, or selected representatives from particular interests or communities, to join a dialogue, share ideas, collaborate on projects and build relationships through electronic communication. Online engagement exercises utilize Internet-based discussion tools, including Email Lists, Live Chat, Bulletin Boards, Web Forums and/or Group Collaboration applications. A more detailed description of these tools is included in Section 3.

Guiding Principles

The guiding principles for online consultations are similar to those for all consultation and engagement processes, as outlined in Appendix A of the *Consultation and Citizen Engagement Policy of the Government of Canada*. Whatever the forum, successful government consultations are built on commitment, clarity, transparency, inclusiveness, accessibility, mutual respect, responsibility and accountability. The following principles apply more specifically to the online environment:

− **Transparency.** As online venues lack the verbal and visual cues necessary for building trust, additional sensitivity and clarity are required in terms of the degree to which activities are open and how the content will be used.

− **Inclusiveness.** The Internet extends the ability to include the broadest possible range of citizens to participate on their own time, at their own discretion and in the official language they prefer.

− **Responsiveness.** Acknowledge and respond to postings or queries in discussion areas or upon submission of a survey, email or form in a timely way. Discretion should guide the use of auto-response tools given the large volume of messages they can generate. No direct question or request should be left unattended even if the response is merely an acknowledgement. Generally accepted timeframes are four (4) hours for an acknowledgement and twenty-four (24) hours for a response.

− **Simplicity.** Whenever possible, err on the side of simplicity in planning online communities or engagement venues. Test user interfaces for intuitive language and navigation.

- **Value the distributed nature of the Internet.** Where multiple parties are involved, work with the distributed nature of the Internet to share involvement and openly demonstrate partnerships. Following this principle should also support accessibility.

- **Innovate only when the time frame permits.** Limit exposure of participants to the first-time use of a tool, particularly if it has not been tested to meet user-friendly standards. Consider using a new tool only when there is time to test the application with a group that is willing to provide feedback on problems and areas for improvement, and you are prepared to act on the feedback.

- **Build on success and learning.** Share best practices and lessons learned. Commit to a common means of sharing customization work, tools of choice and related support documents.

Choosing and customizing the right tools, sharing the right information

The majority of individual Internet users across Canada currently access the World Wide Web with low-speed access and/or older computers. In this context, unless a consultation is specifically targeted to a technologically advanced audience, online tools should be designed for the 'lowest common denominator.'

Online workspaces need to function in a way that is familiar or straightforward to users. In general, the tool should be designed using simple language, allowing users to work in either official language, providing shortcuts for experienced users and detailed help for inexperienced ones, and having a clear and convenient navigation system.

A good discussion tool should, at minimum, include functions that allow users to:

- post links to other Web sites,
- post a follow-up message,
- follow a discussion thread, and
- attach a document in a universally acceptable format.

Section 3 below provides more detailed information on assessing and selecting online tools.

Reliability of the technical infrastructure

> Both the online tool and the technical infrastructure that supports it should be tested, since both are key to successful online engagement. Seamless upgrades and 24-hour, seven-day-a-week reliability should be the goal. Technical staff should be informed of established best practices. Protocols for system upgrades and problem notifications should also be discussed and established in advance. (Section 3 outlines some of the key considerations to bear in mind when assessing technology and software needs.)

Translation and interpretation

Under the requirements of the *Official Languages Act,* information posted on Government of Canada Internet sites (including responses to questions raised during online consultations) must appear in both official languages. Likewise, all messages of an official nature, or which are system-generated as help or text-based error messages, must meet the criteria of the *Official Languages Act.* Exceptions are numeric error messages generated by software.

The decision to translate incoming information from the public is at the discretion of the manager, as long as the approach selected is clearly documented. For example, the "incoming comments" page could include the following instructions to participants: *"You are encouraged to provide comments in the language of your choice."* It might also include a disclaimer, such as: *"These comments are provided in the language of choice of each participant and their content solely represents the participant's point of view."*

Refer to the Treasury Board *Policy on the Use of Official Languages on Electronic Networks,* as well as the *Common Look and Feel for the Internet: Standards and Guidelines* and the *Copyright Act* for additional guidance in this area. (See Section 4 for references.)

Planning and resource implications

Similar to offline efforts, online consultation and engagement processes require planning, management and the allocation of adequate human and financial resources. The following should be taken into account:

Human Resources: **Above all, online consultations require staff time. Having a dedicated person or multidisciplinary team responsible for an online consultation is critical to its success. The following should be considered when dedicating human resources to an online process:**

– *Staff Capacity:* **The skills required to manage a good online consultation include: content expertise, consultation and citizen engagement process expertise, information technology expertise, project management skills, and online facilitation skills. Where technical limitations exist or there is a lack of familiarity with online communication, staff should be trained in making the transition to working online and to communicating in a text-based capacity.**

– *Online Facilitation:* **Certain skills are specific to the online environment, and whether the consultation is interactive, discussion-based or one-way polling, a key competency is online facilitation. Online facilitation involves attending to the social processes impacting participants, both internally and in the public environment.**

Unlike more traditional or face-to-face facilitation, the online facilitator deals with an added dimension – the unique qualities of Internet communication, which lacks the traditional visual cues for facilitators. Online facilitators are trained to test silence, respond to disruptive

behaviour, and clarify unintended typing errors or other problems related to online dialogue.

Just as for offline consultations, it is generally recommended that the online facilitation role be contracted to a neutral third party.

Financial Resources: While it is obvious that software, installation and hosting costs will vary, it is worthwhile to briefly outline the areas in which financial resources will need to be allocated to ensure a successful online consultation. These areas include:

− *Staffing:* At least one full-time senior level staff person directly involved in the issues being discussed and with experience in offline consultation processes should be assigned to manage, monitor and provide the content for online consultation and engagement processes. Also, assigning a bilingual resource could reduce translation costs.

− *Online Facilitation:* As previously mentioned, contracting the online facilitation role to an experienced, neutral third party is highly recommended.

− *Outreach:* An appropriate outreach strategy (including direct mail invitation, telephone outreach, press releases, email notification and targeted community-based media advertising) should be implemented before and throughout the project life cycle to encourage citizens to participate.

− *Technical Web Design and HTML Content:* To be responsive to participants' needs and to create an informed and productive dialogue, the Web site that hosts the online consultation should be updated regularly and contain dynamic and relevant content. Facilitators should be able to rely on the services of qualified Web developers to publish content as needed on an ongoing basis.

Time frames and implications for planning

While Internet technology can increase the speed of work, and reduce costs, it does not necessarily reduce the amount of planning and effort required to ensure success. Throughout all stages of the process, realistic activities with clear timeframes and budgets contribute to the quality of the exercise and the contributions received.

Planning cycles can be **short** (a matter of a few weeks or months), **medium** (a period of 6-12 months) or **long** (a year or more) and will vary according to the issue and context. Translation needs can also affect timing. As experience and expertise is gained online, the time required for planning and tool selection should be substantially reduced. However, the time needed to realistically engage and support participants can be more significant than in some offline processes, such as roundtables or focus groups.

Managers responsible for conducting online consultations should consider adjusting their staffing and resource allocation to accommodate the posted hours of operation of the online consultation. In some cases, this could mean 24 hours a day, seven days a week, given the nature of Internet communication. When appropriate, online facilitators should

have remote access to the discussion area in the evening and on weekends, in order to edit, delete or respond to postings.

Security, Privacy and Authentication

Online consultations present specific challenges with respect to security, privacy and authentication. In an informal online chat or Web-based discussion, for example, interested participants can post information or opinions with relative anonymity. In smaller, member-based online forums, access can be managed, which can help to allay concerns about the authenticity of the participants or about who's listening online.

Consultations conducted on departmental Web sites need to create an online environment that is consistent, secure and comfortable for participants. Creating these conditions involves addressing a series of key challenges in the planning and launch of the online consultation such as:

−   **Rules of Conduct or Acceptable Use Policy** for the online space. The purpose of the consultation, who has been invited, what constitutes unacceptable or inflammatory postings, and how facilitators will deal with problematic content should be specified.

−   **Authenticity.** A registration and confirmation process for participants' contact information should be devised to encourage authenticity and to facilitate the exclusion of users who have violated the posted rules of conduct of the online space.

−   **Participation of ministers and senior officials.** In the event that an elected official or sponsoring Minister of an online consultation posts information or makes themselves available online to respond to citizen questions, clear protocols for authentication and security measures to edit or delete content should be posted, distributed and enforced in a timely and consistent manner.

Managing the Volume of Input

Generally speaking, the *real* work of online consultation is not in controlling or limiting the number of responses, but in enabling, promoting and responding to the relatively limited, but growing number of Canadians willing to share their concerns online. Volume can be managed with some use of automated responses as an initial acknowledgement. If an issue is anticipated to solicit a very high volume of response, additional staff should be available to review, analyze and respond to enquiries. In addition, qualified technical staff should review the online tools to ensure that they are "scaleable" and can be enhanced quickly to accommodate increased demand and expectations, as needed.

Relevant Policies, Legislation and Guidelines

A number of policies, legislation and guidelines are relevant to the Government of Canada's use of online consultation and engagement tools. While some of these have direct application to the online environment (e.g. *Common Look and Feel for the Internet* and *Policy on the Use of Official Languages on Electronic Networks*) others are more generic to all forms of public interaction (e.g. *Access to Information Act, Official Languages Act,* and

Government Communications Policy). A brief description of the various laws, policies and guidelines that apply to online activities is provided in Section 4 of this Appendix.

2. Stages of an Online Consultation or Engagement Process

The process of undertaking a consultation or citizen engagement activity online follows the same five stages outlined in *Appendix A* of the *Consultation and Citizen Engagement Policy of the Government of Canada*. These include preparation, design, implementation, feedback and follow-up, and final evaluation and integration.

The guidelines presented here are to be used in conjunction with the *Consultation and Citizen Engagement Guidelines and Checklist* provided in *Appendix A*. The following complements, and does not replace, those guidelines.

The online effort, whether used to complement an offline consultation or carried out exclusively, requires additional planning. The activities involved in undertaking an online consultation or engagement process are described in detail below and are summarized in a checklist at the end of this section.

STAGE ONE: PREPARATION

- *Assess the state of readiness to engage or consult online.* Determine whether the department or program area has the infrastructure and technical capacity to use the Internet as a platform for public consultation or engagement. For instance, find out if there have been previous effective experiences in this area, whether there are staff familiar with managing an Internet-based project, or what the current practice is for contracting these aspects of the planned activity.

- *Determine human resource requirements. Establish a team with clear roles.* Determine requirements for internal staff, external consultants or a combined team approach to support the effort. Identify any training or other support the staff or team will require to carry out the consultation successfully. Establish clear roles and responsibilities for all team members.

- *Establish performance indicators and criteria for success.* Similar to offline consultation or engagement processes, start with objectives that are clear and easily measurable. Identify performance indicators that will assist the staff to measure efficiency, effectiveness and impact. Criteria for success in online venues should cover technical, staffing and resource elements. Seek agreement early as to the details of each of these so they can be reviewed and modified over time.

- *Consider use of online participant feedback forms* to capture qualitative input on the effort.

- *Document process lessons* as you go to share with colleagues as needed.

STAGE TWO: DESIGN

- ***Identify participants.*** Participation in online venues can range from authenticated secure invitees to broader open public input via a public Web-based form. In every instance, planning should reflect the context of each consultation or engagement activity. To identify participants, consider the scope and expected impact of the planned activity.

- ***Participation by invitation.*** When inviting representative groups to participate in an online consultation (e.g. an advisory committee), the use of passwords and other authentication tools can help to ensure reliability, i.e., that information received was provided by bona fide invitees.

- ***Open participation*** (as appropriate). Those planning public engagement or consultation activities of interest to specific population groups (e.g. seniors, women or youth) or communities of interest (e.g. environment, the arts, science and academia) may issue open invitations to participate through existing online venues. Planning the outreach and invitation process and strategically placing announcements and invitations over a lead-in period can be an effective way of attracting participants. In general, the broader the activity, the greater the participation will be.

- ***Fit the tool to the activity.*** The consultation or engagement tool chosen should reflect the objectives and desired results of the process, as well as the needs and preferences of those being consulted or engaged. (Refer to the online application tables in Section 3 for more on choosing the appropriate tool.)

- ***Customize when necessary.*** A dialogue-based engagement activity may require the customization of a Web-based discussion tool and the creation of an online area for sharing supporting documents or background research. (Again, tool choice is discussed in Section 3.)

- ***Test carefully.*** Test the tools and supporting technical infrastructure carefully for bugs or small setting changes that could affect the process. Ensure that project team members are familiar with the tools and their features prior to launch day.

- ***Identify all content and postings needed for launch in both official languages.*** Ensure that official language requirements are met in full.

- ***Prepare participant guidelines and support materials.*** To assist participants in feeling comfortable using the tools chosen, whether they involve completing a survey form or entering a discussion, clear support materials and guidelines for participation are key. Support materials should detail:

  - timeframes,
  - expectations and pace of work,
  - disclaimers,
  - roles and responsibilities, and
  - rules for discussion-based participation.

- *Take account of special considerations for dialogue-based engagement or consultation activities.* Active support of a dialogue-based discussion area requires trained facilitators and knowledge of the topic being discussed. Do not underestimate the resources required to carry out this type of activity. The following should be undertaken when designing a dialogue-based consultation or engagement:

    - Train facilitators and determine if messages will be moderated (screened prior to posting).

    - Prepare summary and synthesis materials to craft updates of the work underway, and use these to promote the activity if needed.

    - Plan an outreach strategy to actively promote the online venue and be ready with lead-in activities for early arrivals.

    - Define the timeframe for the engagement work and lay out weekly or monthly tasks to establish a clear pace and expectation of work to the participants.

    - Prepare a work plan to co-ordinate staff, technical support, outreach and communications activity and contractors, as needed.

    - Identify the relationship between online and offline activities, plan to integrate or co-ordinate them.

    - Let participants know how they can find out more about other engagement activities related to the subject at hand.

    - Plan the feedback and summary work up front and keep to schedule.

    - Agree on contingency plans if the online discussion tool becomes temporarily unavailable, such as a means to contact all participants by email, fax or phone.

    - Co-ordinate plans with the larger technical support team to ensure routine upgrades or other technical activities will not interfere with the launch or the project's ongoing schedule.

- *Develop outreach and communications plans* that include online resources. Broad public engagement activities on a popular topic should attract participants by open invitation via email, announcements on Web sites and the use of offline tools such as direct mail, telephone outreach and broader promotion in key media (print, television, radio).

- *Co-ordinate outreach activities* with communications staff involved in the engagement planning work and ensure online references are correct in other media. Review all final print-ready materials to ensure that design features have not affected the online references.

STAGE THREE: IMPLEMENTATION

- *Establish an inclusive tone to the discussion,* especially if there is a mix of highly knowledgeable professionals and members of the general public who may feel intimidated by language or jargon.

- *Respond to inquiries in a timely manner.* Generally this means four hours for acknowledgement and 24 hours for response.

- *Update support materials online.* Clarify meanings and routinely link to related resources online. Complete routine updates to keep materials current.

- *Obtain user feedback.* Monitor the pace of activity and modify the process if necessary based on user feedback.

- *Reflect back what people are saying.* This helps to test summary work and to more actively engage participants in working collaboratively.

- *Determine next steps* and post them online to keep participants informed.

STAGE FOUR: FEEDBACK AND FOLLOW-UP

- *Inform participants of how their contributions will be used.* Participants should be given contact information so they may follow-up on findings or recommendations.

- *Tell participants how long the discussion area will remain open.* Also let them know where and how the space will be archived (for example, the space may remain open, but people will not be allowed to post information).

STAGE FIVE: FINAL EVALUATION AND INTEGRATION

- *Collect data and information related to identified criteria for success.* This should be done at all stages as the work proceeds and, when possible, such data should be reflected back to the group online. It may be appropriate, for example, to let participants know how many people are participating or how many online surveys have been received.

- *Co-ordinate online and offline evaluation activities.* Data should be collected only once from each participant.

- *Work with technical staff* to determine which Web-based statistics will be useful. User sessions can be more indicative of participation online than hits, for example.

- *Document and share experiences, lessons and best practices.* To promote good practice and to contribute to the ongoing improvement and effectiveness of online consultation and engagement, lessons and experiences should be documented and shared with colleagues as much as possible.

Online Checklist

Note: This checklist should be used in conjunction with the "Consultation and Citizen Engagement Checklist" provided in *Appendix A*.

STAGE 1: PREPARATION

- ✓ Assess the state of readiness to engage or consult online.
- ✓ Determine resource requirements (human and financial).
- ✓ Establish performance indicators and criteria for evaluating success (both process and outcome).

STAGE 2: DESIGN

- ✓ Identify participants.
- ✓ Choose an approach, tools and resources that are appropriate to the issue and context.
- ✓ Customize tool choices when necessary.
- ✓ Test chosen tool(s) and supporting technical infrastructure carefully.
- ✓ Prepare participation guidelines and support materials for online activity.
- ✓ Clearly define roles and responsibilities.
- ✓ Co-ordinate and build linkages between the online and offline consultation activities.
- ✓ Develop outreach and communications plans that include online resources.

STAGE 3: IMPLEMENTATION

- ✓ Establish an inclusive tone.
- ✓ Respond to inquiries in a timely manner.
- ✓ Update support materials and link to related online resources.
- ✓ Modify pace in response to user feedback.
- ✓ Regularly reflect back to participants to verify input.
- ✓ Establish links to next steps and post them online.

STAGE 4: FEEDBACK AND FOLLOW UP

- ✓ Synthesize input from both online and offline processes.
- ✓ Clearly indicate how participant input will be used.
- ✓ Indicate how long the consultation site will remain open and where information will be archived.
- ✓ Identify point of contact for participant follow-up on findings or recommendations.

STAGE 5: FINAL EVALUATION AND INTEGRATION

- ✓ Collect information and statistics related to evaluation criteria and reflect this online, on an ongoing basis.
- ✓ Co-ordinate evaluation of online and offline activities, work with technical staff.
- ✓ Document and share experiences and lessons learned.

3. Assessing and Selecting Online Tools

The choice of technology for consulting and engaging citizens should be guided by the following considerations:

- *The type of process should drive technology choices.* Just as for offline consultations, the type of online application used has a profound effect on the success of the exercise. Some important aspects to consider are:

    - Who is being engaged?

    - Is this an open engagement process, involving large numbers of participants reflecting a broad spectrum of Canadian society?

    - Is this a focused engagement exercise, seeking input from targeted individuals and groups?

    - Is the issue being addressed regional, provincial, national or international in scope?

    - How is the information gathered in this process going to be used? Are there required outcomes or measures that must result?

    - Is there much background information required for meaningful involvement?

    - What relationship, if any, is there to a concurrent offline engagement activity?

- *Online discussion can be synchronous or asynchronous.* Synchronous discussion occurs with everyone together at the same time, e.g. a live chat. Asynchronous discussion enables people to participate at different times, at their convenience, e.g. a Web-based discussion.

- *Online engagement technology must be highly accessible.* In order to ensure that the majority of Canadians can participate in the online engagement activities of the government a number of accessibility considerations need to be addressed:

    - Most Canadians do not have high-speed access to the Internet. Thus, online engagement tools should avoid relying on technologies that require end users to have fast connections. Lower bandwidth requirements facilitate broader participation.

    - Participants should not be required to download special software in order to participate. Engagement tools should be accessible through standard World Wide Web browsers or email programs. Background information and discussion papers should be available as Web pages or in email format, rather than requiring participants to download files to their local machines.

- Online engagement must take account of the needs of persons with disabilities. Software and set-up choices must follow accepted standards to ensure their accessibility.

- Providing choices for participating is another important way to ensure broad accessibility. In addition to providing background information in a variety of formats, many engagement tools offer participants the ability to use email instead of the World Wide Web. Conversely, email-based applications (mailing lists) now come with intuitive Web interfaces.

- ***Chosen technology must provide a bilingual interface and comply with Common Look and Feel standards.*** In addition to the requirements of the Treasury Board *Common Look and Feel for the Internet: Standards and Guidelines* and the *Official Languages Act*, there are a number of other online bilingual considerations:

  - Participants should be able to choose their language preference and set the default when they log in.

  - Participants should be able to switch easily from one language interface to the other.

  - Where translation is not provided, participants should be able to view comments from other participants in the original language, while staying within the interface of their choice.

  - All system-generated communication must be available in both official languages (error messages, welcome messages, help files, etc.).

- ***Ongoing collaboration is required between experts in consultation and information technology.*** To ensure that the objectives, integrity and desired outcomes of the consultation or engagement process are achieved, ongoing collaboration is required between those responsible for the overall management of the process and those responsible for the IT aspects. Issues of data integrity, server administration, operation and security will affect the degree to which consultation managers can keep their online process on the right track. The following are some key areas where close collaboration and timely response are necessary:

  - In the case of a discussion application, where signing in, adding, removing and modifying participation may be required.

  - Adding, removing or modifying individual messages.

  - Adding or removing background information or discussion papers, before and during an engagement process.

  - Adding or removing new sub-discussions or discussion threads.

- *Hosting.* While most Web-based applications do not require participants to download special software to participate, many of them do require specific back-end or server side software. Increasingly, these types of tools are built on a database back-end that requires the host server to be running a specific database program. More popular applications are frequently available in different formats so they can run on a variety of platforms.

- *Software Licensing.* Some applications, especially the more robust group collaboration tools, often license their software based on a per-user basis. This model can be too expensive for an engagement exercise involving large numbers of participants.

- *Customization.* The engagement application should allow for a fair degree of customization in terms of look and feel. Avoid applications that cannot be easily integrated into an existing Web site.

- *Training requirements.* More complex applications may require special training both for the IT staff as well as the responsible manager. This is especially important for engagement exercises that must be launched with a short time frame.

Email versus Web-based discussion tools

Online tools designed to support discussion generally fall into two camps: email-based and Web-based applications that can be public, private or read-only. Live chat, bulletin boards, Web forums and group collaboration are examples of online applications for consultation and engagement. Such tools enable key activities, including the work of the staff or third party contractors, to be monitored first-hand.

The choice should be based on preference and context. In any given electronic discussion group, it is likely that about half the participants will prefer email to Web-based discussion tools. The best way to ensure participation, regardless of tool choice, is by creating a compelling and legitimate reason for citizens to engage in the issue in the first place.

Email mailing lists: Email is the most commonly used tool on the Internet. It is easy, accessible, intuitive and critical to an increasing number of Canadians. Electronic mailing list software allows a group of participants (subscribers) to communicate with each other through a single email address. Original email is sent to the main address and replies are distributed to all participants. Some software applications permit Web-based subscribing or unsubscribing and the archiving of older postings. Lists can be set as public or private, moderated (postings are screened) or facilitated.

When using electronic mailing list software, discussion takes place only in email or can be archived automatically to a public or password protected Web page. Archiving to a Web page, however, does not allow posting to the list from that page. Efforts to create dual gateways between Web-based discussion tools and mail lists have not been entirely successful. The technology does not do both things well. With some software choices

participants can use Web interfaces to subscribe and unsubscribe and perform routine maintenance on their subscription. Administrators can also use Web-based interfaces for maintaining the list.

The advantage of electronic mailing lists include:

− Messages are delivered directly to participant in-boxes.

− Replying to the discussion is as simple as writing and sending an email.

− There are no problems with learning a new interface.

− In settings where dial-up access is difficult or expensive, email permits people to join in but allows offline time to compose responses.

Some of the challenges are:

− It is difficult to manage the volume of messages if the discussion has many participants or the dialogue is lively (using email filters to designated mailboxes can be useful).

− It is difficult to track what has been said if messages are not archived.

− If an email mailing list is chosen, ensure there are means to back-up archives on the email server if there are no Web-based archives.

Web-based discussion tools: The advantages of Web-based discussion tools include:

− They permit users to sign-in and introduce themselves, allowing late comers to get their bearings. This assists participation and reduces duplication of comments.

− They build a living history of input and discussion for others to see.

− Threading supports response tracking. One can see immediately which topics are eliciting responses.

− Summaries can be posted periodically within the context of the larger discussion.

− Rich material is available for researchers and evaluators to return to for further analysis.

− They encourage self-directed orientation at a pace driven by the individual.

Some of the challenges related to Web-based discussion tools include:

− Large volumes of postings can be onerous; hence, the ability to move material, re-name headings and topics and cluster content can be helpful features.

- Reminding people to return – email notifications generated automatically when new messages appear are a helpful feature to look for.

- The need to find the right reason(s) for people to use the tool and continue to count on it over time.

Choosing appropriate technologies

The two tables on the next page – "Online Applications in Context" and "Online Applications for Type of Activity Planned" – are designed to optimize the use of Internet based tools in any given situation. They should be used as a guide only. Specific circumstances may require choices that are exceptions to the generally recommended use. The following list describes the specific tools referred to in each table.

Electronic Mailing Lists: An email-based application that allows a group of participants (subscribers) to communicate with each other through a single email address. (See "Email mailing lists" on page 41 for a more complete description.)

Online Polling (survey): A Web-based application that allows users to express opinions through an interactive form. Users are presented with a series of questions and are asked to make choices from a predetermined list or to provide short answers.

Live Chat: A real time text-based application that allows users to chat across the Internet. Most types of chat require the user to download special software in order to participate. Users can then look for others on the same system to initiate a one-to-one chat or enter a predetermined chat room and interact with multiple users.

Bulletin Board: A Web-based application where users can post messages to a Web site. This is a relatively simple tool that allows participants to post responses to each other's messages but does not provide true discussion threading.

Discussion (Web-based): Similar to a bulletin board, Web-based discussions allow participants to post message and respond to messages. Additional functionality includes rudimentary document sharing, discussion threading and password protection.

Web Forum: Online Web forum applications combine the functionality of Web-based discussions with aspects of live chat. This type of online collaboration tool includes real time 'white boarding' or brainstorming, chat, file sharing within an asynchronous discussion area, a document repository and some limited project tracking tools.

Group Collaboration: This type of application is the most robust in terms of functionality. Sometimes referred to as "Intranet" software, these tools are often password protected with multiple levels of access. Work groups are created with access to shared resources based on user permissions. Both synchronous and asynchronous features are available. These tools are often too expensive and complicated to be used for a single project or task and tend to be used throughout an organization as an integral part of daily work processes.

Online Applications in Context

Context	Email Lists	Online Polling	Live Chat	Bulletin Board	Web-Based Discussion	Web Forum	Group Collaboration with Document Management
Time Frame for Engagement	Any	Short to Medium	Short	Medium to Long	Medium to Long	Any	Short to Long
Time Frame for Set-up and Promotion	Short	Any	Short to Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium to Long	Medium to Long
Open Audience	N/A	Appropriate	N/A	Appropriate	N/A	N/A	N/A
Targeted Audience	Appropriate	Appropriate	Appropriate	Appropriate	Appropriate	Appropriate	Appropriate
Level of Human Resources Required	Low	Low	Medium	Medium to High	High	High	High
Appropriate Participation Volume	Small to Medium	Medium to Large	Small	Small to Medium	Small to Medium	Small to Medium	Small
Effective in Supporting Offline Engagement	Appropriate	N/A	N/A	Appropriate	Appropriate	Appropriate	Appropriate
Degree of Control over Feedback	Low-Medium	High	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium	High

Online Applications for Type of Activity Planned

Activity	Email Lists	Online Polling	Live Chat	Bulletin Board	Web-Based Discussion	Web Forum	Group Collaboration with Document Management
Deliberative Technique (study circle, citizen juries)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Appropriate	Appropriate	Appropriate
Polling, Survey	N/A	Appropriate	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Search Conference	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Appropriate	Appropriate	Appropriate
Focus Group	N/A	N/A	Appropriate	N/A	N/A	N/A	Appropriate
Round Tables	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Appropriate	Appropriate	Appropriate
Tele-Voting	N/A	Appropriate	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Electronic Town Hall	N/A	N/A	Appropriate	N/A	N/A	Appropriate	Appropriate

4. References and Resources

The following is an overview of some of the relevant legislation, policies and guidelines applicable to the online environment of the Government of Canada. Examples of online consultation and citizen engagement practices from Canada and abroad, along with other reference materials, are also included. Hyperlinks to Web sites and electronically posted documents are provided as well.

I. Legislation

Access to Information Act provides a right of access to information under government control, on the principle that government information should be available to the public, that necessary exceptions should be limited and specific, and that decisions should be reviewed independently of government.

http://canada.justice.gc.ca/STABLE/EN/Laws/Chap/A/A-1.html and

Copyright Act ensures that all materials on the Internet, i.e. text, postings to news or discussion groups, e-mail messages, photographs, graphics, digitized music, etc. are protected by copyright. The individual or organization that created the work or for which the work was created owns the copyright. (Also see the *Government Communications Policy* described below.)

http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/laws/C-42/index.htm (sections, 12, 13, 14)

Official Languages Act and Regulations ensures respect for English and French as the official languages of Canada as well as the equality of status and equal rights and privileges as to their use in all federal institutions, in particular "…in communicating with or providing services to the public…"

http://canada.justice.gc.ca/en/laws/O-3.01/74830.html

Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act primarily applies to the private sector but addresses public sector considerations as well.

http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/P-8.6/text.html

Privacy Act protects the personal information of individuals that public institutions collect and store for government purposes.

http://canada.justice.gc.ca/FTP/EN/Laws/Chap/P/P-21.txt

II. Policies

Access to Information Policy was developed to ensure effective and consistent administration of the *Access to Information Act and Regulations* on a government-wide basis. The policy recognizes the government's duty to inform as the essential principle underlying the access legislation. It encourages institutions to disclose to requesters the

maximum information possible in a timely and consistent manner. It also aims to ensure that responses are co-ordinated across institutions and that adequate consultation takes place within and among institutions when preparing responses, particularly when the subject is interdepartmental in scope, or involves major legal or policy issues.

http://www.publiservice.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pubs_pol/gospubs/TBM_121/CHAP1_1_e.html

Common Look and Feel for the Internet: Standards and Guidelines is to be applied consistently to electronic services, including Government of Canada Internet and Intranet sites, products and deliverables, in order to reinforce federal identity, presence and visibility.

http://publiservice.tbs-sct.gc.ca/si-si/clf/

Common Services Policy outlines mandatory and optional communications, consultation and publishing services available to institutions through various common service agencies.

http://www.publiservice.tbs-sct.gc.ca/Pubs_pol/dcgpubs/TB_93/CSP_e.html

Contracting Policy provides the framework for contracting communications and consultation services, notably those related to advertising, publishing (in all forms of media) and public opinion research.

http://www.publiservice.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pubs_pol/dcgpubs/Contracting/contractingpol_e.html

Federal Identity Program (FIP) is the Government of Canada's corporate identity program. Its goal is to make the Government of Canada visible in the daily lives of Canadians by helping them to recognize at a glance the programs, services and activities of government institutions. It applies to a wide range of applications, including signs, vehicles, stationery, forms, advertising, publications and Web sites.

http://www.publiservice.tbs-sct.gc.ca/Pubs_pol/sipubs/TB_FIP/CHAP2_e.html

Government Communications Policy **sets out the basic principles of government communications in a parliamentary democracy. It directs institutions to take account of the concerns and views of the public when establishing priorities, developing policies and implementing programs. Key objectives are to ensure that the government is visible, accessible and answerable to the public it serves. Roles, responsibilities and accountabilities for communications management are delineated in the policy.**

http://www.publiservice.tbs-sct.gc.ca/Pubs_pol/sipubs/comm/comm_e.html

Management of Information Technology Policy and associated guidelines establish a management framework to ensure that information technology is used as a strategic tool to support government priorities and program delivery, increase productivity and enhance service to the public.

http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/Pubs_pol/ciopubs/TB_IT/CHAP2_1_e.html

Policy for Public Key Infrastructure Management in the Government of Canada creates a basis for essential security features (including confidentiality, digital signature and non-repudiation services), essential for public servants to exchange sensitive information and conduct electronic transactions online.

http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pubs_pol/ciopubs/PKI/pki1_e.html

Policy on Privacy and Data Protection is designed to ensure the effective and consistent application of the provisions of the *Privacy Act* by government institutions; to ensure that data-matching and data linkage of personal information for administrative purposes meet the requirements of that legislation; and to limit collection and use of the Social Insurance Number (SIN).

http://www.publiservice.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pubs_pol/gospubs/TBM_128/INTRODUC_e.html

Policy on the Management of Government Information Holdings (MGIH) and related guidelines establish a management framework to ensure the widest possible use of information in the federal government as a corporate resource to support effective decision-making, organize government information for ready access and conservation, and preserve a coherent public record of government policies and programs.

http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/Pubs_pol/ciopubs/TB_GIH/CHAP3_1_e.html

Policy on the Use of Electronic Networks defines both acceptable and unacceptable uses of electronic networks for public servants (i.e. Intranet and Internet), and provides guidance on the response to objectionable conduct.

http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pubs_pol/ciopubs/tb_cp/uene.html

Policy on the Use of Official Languages on Electronic Networks sets out the official languages obligations of institutions subject to the *Official Languages Act* in using electronic networks to provide services to, or communicate with, the public or employees.

http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pubs_pol/hrpubs/OffLang/uolee.html

Review, Evaluation and Internal Audit Policies provide direction on conducting audits and evaluations of programs, services, information systems and management.

http://www.publiservice.tbs-sct.gc.ca/Pubs_pol/dcgpubs/TBM_161/siglist_e.html

Security Policy is designed to ensure the appropriate safeguarding of all sensitive information and assets of the government.

http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/pubs_pol/gospubs/TBM_12A/CHAPT1-1_e.html

III. Guidelines

Government of Canada Internet Guide provides an overview of federal, provincial, territorial and municipal initiatives on the Internet with general guidance on the creation and administration of a government Web site.

http://canada.gc.ca/programs/guide/index.html

IV. Online Initiatives in Canada and Abroad

The Rural Dialogue, an initiative of the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, involves both face-to-face and electronic approaches (an extensive Web site and email mailing list) to engage rural Canadians in policy discussions on rural issues.

www.rural.gc.ca

National Consultation on Environmental Education and Sustainable Development. This Canadian initiative seeks public input on the development of a national environmental education strategy via an online questionnaire. The site allows participants to interact with each other.

www.ec.gc.ca/education/

Commission d'étude sur les services de santé et les services sociaux, Québec. This site includes several background papers, regional syntheses of consultations and a survey on the future financing and organization of health services in the province of Quebec.

www.cessss.gouv.qc.ca

The *US Senate* has set up a Web-based forum on the topic of e-government policy, called *E-Government: An Experiment in Interactive Legislation*. The site provides multiple windows on e-government issues, publishes readers' comments and promotes inter-reader dialogue. While the issues raised are not binding, this experiment is opening up the American legislative process to more interactive deliberation.

http://gov_affairs.senate.gov/egov/

The *Singapore* government's *Feedback* site has been developed as the official channel for Singaporeans to voice their views through electronic forums and dialogue sessions on a broad range of proposed government policies and initiatives.

www.gov.sg/feedback

Minnesota E-Democracy Project. One of the earliest experiments in online political discussion, this Web site and political listserv were established in 1994 to monitor state elections and post information about, and by, gubernatorial candidates. The project put most of the candidates for governor and Senate online and held the first online debate among candidates at that level. Today, the listserv and Web site hosts discussions on

political issues in Minnesota (MN-Politics) and elsewhere, and the Minnesota forum has taken on a deliberative quality with a more-or-less stable list of 400 participants.

http://www.e-democracy.org

The United Kingdom Government's "Citizenspace" is a one-stop portal that provides opportunities for citizens to participate in government consultation processes as well as in online discussions on a range of topics. Through this portal – formerly on the 10 Downing Street site at http://www.number-10.gov.uk – UK citizens can find out about government plans, directly access government consultation sites, and contribute to the formulation of new policies.

http://online.gov.uk\citizenspace\default.asp

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