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Passion for progress

Patrick Cormier is pushing for more efficient, interactive government. Providing guidance on Web 2.0 technologies is his new association's first order of business

Peter Hum, The Ottawa Citizen
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The seeds for Ottawa's newest think tank were sown in 1997, when Patrick Cormier, then a law student at McGill University, came under the sway of some especially thought-provoking reading.

een public opinion and government, and suggested solutions so that people's voices could be better heard by politicians.



"It was the first time I started to think about these issues," Cormier says. "The book inspired me in trying to provide new methods for citizens to engage with government."

But it took more than eight years -- until this spring -- for Cormier to create the private association to realize his ambition. That's because the tools, methods and spirit that are part and parcel of Cormier's Government 2.0 Think Tank have only now come into their own.

For the last few weeks, Cormier has been roaming the blogosphere and meeting like-minded folks in person wherever possible, drawing attention and support for his website (www.gov20.info).

Go there, and you'll see an enthusiastic, interactive site that means to unite people (not just public servants) who want to make governments (not just Canada's federal government) more efficient and interactive. The latest Web technologies and the thinking behind the open-source software movement are the means towards those ends, Cormier believes.

Cormier, 35, happens to be a public servant, a Department of National Defence project director. However, the Government 2.0 Think Tank (G2TT for short), its website and everything that flows from it are strictly personal pursuits -- although they stem from his forthright declaration: "My passion is the public service."

Cormier has attracted other public servants who share his desires and are willing to spend their own time furthering their common cause. As well, private-sector participants, especially those who embrace the open-source spirit of collaboration and knowledge-sharing, are signing up for G2TT. Some were already members of GOSLING (Getting Open Source Logic Into Governments), an Ottawa group that wants to change the way Canadian governments buy and develop software.

While G2TT members will principally collaborate online at Cormier's website, a face-to-face meeting was also in order. A week ago, Cormier drew about 20 people to a Library and Archives Canada meeting room.

The attendees were from all walks of life, "public sector, private sector, men, women, old, young, from the lowest ranking public servant to directors," says Octavian Petrescu, G2TT's 21-year-old webmaster and a fledgling public servant. "I find this kind of diversity appealing."

Attendees chose their executive members, hashed out conditions for membership (\$15 a year allows one to contribute; registered lurkers are welcome) and discussed the association's charter and first order of business -- which Cormier calls "Project Eureka."

By working together online, Cormier's members plan to produce project reports with concrete solutions and recommendations to problems and challenges in government operations. The first project, "Eureka," will examine how governments might leverage participatory Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, Wikis, podcasts, RSS feeds and social tagging.

"This is something that we want to do for our first project -- something that is so incredibly simple that you can't argue with it," Cormier says.

The only question is: will governments be able to take the gifts that Cormier's group will proffer and make something of them?

Compared to individuals and corporations, governments seem to be late to the Web 2.0 party.

Technorati.com tracks more than 75,000 new online diaries created every day -- one per second -- but the blogs of cat lovers or stamp collectors far outnumber those that exist to deliver government services or make governments run more smoothly. Among corporations, General Motors, Sun Microsystems and many other companies boast top executives who write blogs to reach customers and solicit feedback.

Among tech businesses, IBM has been notably quick to embrace social bookmarking -- a Web 2.0 way of organizing, browsing and sharing Internet browser bookmarks popularized most in the last few years by the website del.icio.us. IBM researchers have designed and developed an enterprise social bookmarking system called dogear. It allows employees to bookmark pages within IBM's Intranet and find experts on specific topics on staff by determining who else has been bookmarking relevant pages. "This form of expertise location helps spur collaboration and sharing of resources within the company," notes an online IBM article.

Podcasts -- downloadable audio content that takes advantage of the explosion of portable digital media players such as the iPod -- have caught on not only with tech companies and organizations such as the Ottawa Centre for Research and Innovation. Companies as diverse as Purina, Simon & Shuster and Whirlpool are podcasting in an effort to reach customers and create communities.

The CBC podcasts, as did Canada's embassy in Washington, D.C. However, the technology trend has yet to catch on with other government ministries.

For a host of reasons, governments lag in their adoption of the latest Web technologies.

When G2TT members met last week and discussed what might obstruct their efforts, "there was a universal understanding that there is a generational gulf that has to be overcome," says Nathan Rudyk, the association's vice-president of community relations. In other words, there are many veteran public servants who are far more tech-averse than newer, younger hires.

That said, independent of G2TT, Rudyk's Almonte-based company market2world communications has made presentations on Web 2.0 technologies to senior bureaucrats at Transport Canada. Rudyk says department staff have played around with blogs and Wikis behind their firewall.

There are also difficulties because the government's best minds on technology may be flung across many organizations. "Many public servants possess the necessary knowledge to empower their government to embrace these major (technological) trends," Cormier writes at his website. "Unfortunately they are typically responsible for only one piece of the problem."

"This is where G2TT comes in," he says.

The biggest stumbling block for the federal government, Cormier says, is that its online presence must adhere to so many rigorous policies and standards. Federal online offerings must respect policies regarding bilingualism, privacy, records management, access to information and what the Treasury Board of Canada calls the "Common Look and Feel" standards.

"When it comes to Web 2.0 in government, where the rubber meets the road is compliance," Cormier says. "This is an interesting challenge to be tackled by G2TT."

By the end of this year or in early 2007, when Microsoft releases the next version of its market-leading Internet Explorer Web browser, Web 2.0 will explode, Rudyk says.

Internet Explorer 7 will include an RSS (real simple syndication) reader -- technology that more forward-thinking Net surfers already use to subscribe to content feeds from forward-thinking websites, eliminating the need to browse favourite webpages on the off-chance they have been updated.

"When that (Explorer's next version) gets released, it will be like a gigantic 'on' switch being thrown," Rudyk says. "Governments and corporations will be utterly transformed. Everybody will expect they can subscribe to new content."

The CBC issues RSS feeds. However, all the reports, press releases and content that governments produce are by and large only available via a conventional browser.

"RSS feeds for government websites could prove quite useful in giving the public immediate updates," says Petrescu, an information management project officer at Library and Archives Canada. He cites as an example an RSS feed that would send subscribers immediate word when laws or regulations that apply to them are modified.

Petrescu hopes that the G2TT website will persuasively showcase Web 2.0 capabilities including RSS feeds, social tagging, podcasting, co-operative blogging and forums. "I plan to use the latest and most dynamic tools available," says Petrescu. "As technologies and tools emerge, we plan to keep up with each one." His goal is to demonstrate how new Web technologies can be integrated into government operations.

Cormier says there's no need to reach for the stars with attempts at comprehensive, systematic solutions for government tech issues. He prefers to tackle discrete, "easy" problems such as e-mail overload.

Federal public servants receive more than 1.5 billion e-mails a year, of which half are mass e-mails via distribution lists, Cormier notes. And yet, the distribution list implies a community that might be reached more efficiently if e-mails were posted to a syndicated blog, he says.

He points out another internal information management problem for government -- information that will not be found. "It is easier to find information on the Internet with Google than on governmental Intranets," he says. This problem, Cormier suggests, can be alleviated with syndicated search collections that can be updated by users, coupled with a natural search language query engine.

Cormier also says that G2TT could offer a Web 2.0 suggestion to address online content management failures and complications.

"At the working level, in all governments, there are always ad hoc needs to manage content online, from the very small to the very large," Cormier says. However, corporate content management systems are not always up to the task, and custom solutions are sometimes requested. Cormier suggests that a free, open-source generic Web content management platform could be used along side to meet the challenge.

At his blog, Cormier suggests that Drupal, one such Web content management system, would be a good fit for the federal government. Drupal is compatible with "Common Look and Feel" standards, supports bilingual websites and is fully Web-2.0 enabled, incorporating blogs, social tagging, Wikis and the like. Moreover, he notes that Treasury Board Secretariat guidelines prescribe departments and agencies to at least consider free and open source options.

For the first G2TT project, Cormier hopes that his group's online efforts will yield a rough draft of a report by the end of 2006, and that a final report might be released by the end of March 2007.

While the group has much work ahead of it, Cormier can already name potential follow-up projects.

Next year, his association might try to draft a manual of information management for government chief information managers. Or it could look into deliberative opinion polls and democratic policy development -- focussed, informed polling and consequent decision-making as proposed by James Fishkin in The Voice of the People.

As if G2TT wasn't enough of an extra-curricular pursuit, Cormier, who has a young family and regularly hosts wine and cheese events, is also writing a book, Information Leadership.

He's shown plenty of leadership already, say Rudyk and Petrescu.

"In Patrick, I see a leader and one of the few people I know I am willing to follow," says Petrescu. "He is very social, has a very good knowledge of the subject and is not too involved in the technological aspect to forget about the business benefits Web 2.0 tools could provide to the Canadian government."

"He's an inspiring guy," says Rudyk. "All of this comes from his own passion for how government can be transformed."

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