

Failing Grade for the Managers of ACA Website Roll Out

By Byron A. Ellis - October 28, 2013



The roll-out of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) demonstrated a lack of governmental capacity, as well as the blame game played by government contractors and government officials.

According to the contractors, no one was in the lead, and they constructed and tested the different modules of the ACA website in isolation. However, operational support for complex systems requires capable coordination of resources.

The requirements of the ACA web portal were not delineated. Requirement engineering (RE) is the interactive process that embeds the needs and requirements of the client, in this case, the federal government. It deals with (a) customers, users, and market requirements, (b) design requirements, and (c) technical requirements. Thus, the concepts of RE were not fulfilled.

The conceptual design phase of the ACA web portal should have included parameters for the client brief (mission), the initial model, and design services. Thus, the requirements of government officials should have mandated a government coordinator and a lead contractor to evaluate the brief requirements, and given available constraints, develop the required performance and operational availability for a specific start date.

Professor Farazmand,¹ believes that traditional administrative capacities are not good enough to meet the challenges ahead and that there is a need to retool public governance and administration to develop new sets of knowledge, skills, cultures, and designs that are nonlinear and surprise management-oriented in organization and management.

Capacity is generally defined as the ability to perform functions, solve problems, set goals, and achieve objectives. Farazmand argues that governments must continuously upgrade their administrative capacities to meet new challenges.

However, given the federal government traditional employment screening processes, it is difficult for the government to upgrade administrative capacity. Nonetheless, it is the lack of capacity that caused the implementation failure of the ACA web portal.

Cheung² argues that failure to govern exposes the limitations of government capacity. ACA website failure gives a glimpse of the limitation of the government's administrative capacity and ability to manage contractors.

¹ Farazmand, A. (2009). Building administrative capacity for an age of rapid Globalization: A modest prescription for twenty-first century. *Public Administration Review*, p. 1007-1020.

² Cheung, A. B. L. (2009). A Response to "Building administrative capacity for the age of rapid globalization: A modest prescription for the twenty-first century." *Public Administration Review*, p. 1034-1036.

Lack of administrative capacity is a direct result of the inappropriate allocation of human resources (capacity) within governments. Furthermore, a lack of human capacity inhibits efficient anticipatory responses to challenges confronting the government.

Inappropriate human capacity within organizations is a personnel allocation problem; it is about managers misunderstanding the concept of differential abilities.

The allocation of personnel in public administration is seldom based on knowledge. Instead, it is often based on overcoming entry barriers, as well as on relationships, which prevents public institutions from expanding capacity, continuously improving performance and minimizing outlays.

However, in a globalized world, it is paramount to exploit differential abilities and allocate the best and the brightest to accomplish the tasks to which they have the greatest expertise.

It should have been unthinkable to roll out a critical software for the President's signature legislation without holistically testing it's functionally.

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