



Governance in Interoperability is Key to Success

If you start assembling an item by forcing a square peg into a round hole, you might end up using all of the pieces, yet still creating something that doesn't work very well. And if you start an interoperability project by purchasing technology instead of analyzing the problems that need to be solved and coming up with a plan that involves all of the stakeholders, you might end up with a patchwork solution that doesn't address all of your area's problems.

According to George Ake, a retired major with the North Carolina Highway Patrol who is presently with the Border Research and Technology Center (BRTC)—Austin (operated by the Sheriffs' Association of Texas), overcoming jurisdictions' desire to implement technical solutions before thoroughly understanding the business needs represents one of the key challenges an agency faces in providing interoperability-related technical assistance. Kelly Harris, deputy executive director of SEARCH, the National Consortium for Justice Information and Statistics, agrees.

"It's so much more important to figure out the business problems that need to be solved first," Harris says. "Too often, folks hear about the latest and greatest technology and want to use it, and that so often leads to failure. You need to define the existing communication and information-sharing needs and look at it from the perspective of what needs to be accomplished. Then, you need to get the right stakeholders around the table to make that happen and get them to make a firm commitment. You next define your operational needs and last of all, apply the technology. Too often, people identify the technology without first figuring out what problems the technology needs to solve."

"It's a real change of paradigm," Ake says. "People for years have just worried about their own issues. They need to realize they have to sit down, talk, and put away their differences, and to realize that all stakeholders must feel they have ownership in the solutions. It's got to be a partnership where people work together and everybody has input in the process."

Both Harris and Ake work for organizations that can help law enforcement agencies start the interoperability process by putting the right pieces in place first and moving on from there. Ake also provides onsite technology assistance that includes providing a notebook of samples, best practices, and models.

"I don't tell them what to do, I tell them what has worked in other areas and might work for them," Ake says. "Every State and area is unique and has its own political issues."

Ake helped draft a short article, available at www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/topics/technology/communication/governance.htm, titled *Effective Police Communications Systems Require New "Governance."* This document addresses key points in the process, including challenges to developing a governance structure and lessons learned. SEARCH also offers a number of educational materials on its website, including its popular tech guide series (<http://www.search.org/programs/safety/tech-guide.asp>), which Harris describes as "sort of how-to manuals. There are a lot of best practices for planning and implementing information-sharing systems. We see the same trends over and over. People make the same mistakes, and the same best practices will overcome those."

Ake has experience working in the field and with nationwide efforts as a veteran of governance development efforts with the State of North Carolina in 1996 and with CapWIN (the Capital Wireless Information Network) in 2000. He began providing technology assistance to other jurisdictions in the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and believes that governance has become a major issue in the ensuing years.

"The technology is not the issue," Ake says. "If people don't work together and partner, you won't get them to use the same technology. Governance is the foundation."

To contact SEARCH, phone 916-392-2550 or visit <http://www.search.org>. To contact the BRTC-Austin, phone George Ake at 512-992-9971 or e-mail gake@txsheriffs.org. BRTC is a program of the Office of Justice Programs' National Institute of Justice. SEARCH helps States develop comprehensive plans for justice information management that meet Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) formula grant program and other Federal reporting requirements and offers a variety of no-cost services funded by BJA under the National Technical Assistance and Training Program. More information on SEARCH and BJA can be found at <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/bja/fs000253.pdf>.

WHAT IS GOVERNANCE?

An information technology governance structure is composed of the processes and organizational mechanisms used by the enterprise to accomplish its overarching strategic goals and ideas. The governance structure can be an existing board, committee, council, or commission that has been authorized for this job, or a board, committee, council, or commission that has been created specifically to oversee the interoperability initiative. Governance can also be the shared responsibility of two or more entities or individuals.

There is no right or wrong way to build a governance structure. Governance structures can be formal or informal but tend to begin with agreements, such as memorandums of understanding, by the people who will be most affected by the structures. Governance structures can be created in a number of other ways as well, through State law, joint powers agreements signed by agencies in separate jurisdictions or by several jurisdictions in a region, or signed charters or other agreements. Whatever the agreement, the document should be a statement of general goals that identifies the members and the decisionmaking process.

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