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# **Facilitating effective online participation in e-government**

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## **Introduction**

Imagine a future where every citizen has the opportunity to participate online in the decisions, the services and the policies that govern the country they live in.

What might that possibility look like?

How might that change the way we relate to our government?

What would be required to make that possible?

The collective knowledge and wisdom of the country's citizens could be applied to assist with the challenges and opportunities the nation faces. Citizens are more likely to feel ownership of the country's direction, as well as the government's services and policies because they will have been part of the conversation that created them. Everyone would have a chance to have their say, and a more inclusive future would be constructed together.

In imagining this possibility, it's possible to see that the future of government could be much more participative than it is currently. The development of new computing and internet technologies is beginning to make online participative government a reality.

## **Emergent online citizen participation**

As the people of New Zealand find more value in using online media, they are becoming more confident in using technology and are expanding their awareness of online communication. Citizens are learning new ways of working together. They are emailing each other, joining online communities, discussion forums, chat rooms, working in distributed teams, participating in training online, setting up their own websites, and using wikis, blogging, VoIP, and are networking globally. People are participating in ways never seen before.

The benefits become more obvious as people gain skills, experience, and confidence in using online technology. As usage of online media grows, the possibility of highly diverse cultural communication in a connected world becomes a reality.

## **What is online facilitation?**

*Online facilitation* is a process in which a person who is acceptable to all members of an online group, is substantively neutral, and has no decision-making authority, is chosen to intervene in a group's process to assist its effectiveness and meet its purpose.

## **How is online facilitation beneficial?**

Skilled group facilitation has been viewed as an effective solution to many of the problems associated with people meeting to discuss issues and make decisions. Challenges to an organisation, to its leaders, personal attacks, using the group's space for negative feedback, or to push personal agendas are just some of the areas where a facilitator can assist the process of online participation.

As a process guide, the facilitator helps a group create and orientate to a shared purpose and a group culture (guidelines or ground rules). They also address conflict and make interventions to keep the group moving towards its goals.

Online facilitators can be seen working with groups in a range of ways such as improving the flow of real-time meetings, developing group relationships, visioning, decision-making, problem solving, conflict resolution, co-operative participation, and assisting participants to use the technology itself.

The skills of online facilitation are useful in enhancing the effectiveness of any online participation project. Enhanced effectiveness of participation for the e-government can translate into processes that ultimately improve services, policies and outcomes.

### **Looking to the future**

The future of online participation will require many aspects to successfully come together – some of these are structural and some are technological. Others however, will be about group process and about the inter-dynamics of people. Effectively managing these processes and dynamics will require the skills of facilitation. Citizens will be looking to e-government for these skills within the technology that is provided. As group technology develops and new technologies emerge, the role of the facilitator will be an adaptable one – to continue to guide a group to reach its purpose and to maintain its guidelines and culture.