

Designing and Managing Electronic Consultation Processes

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe the process of designing and managing electronic consultation processes.

It is based, first, on some eighteen years' experience of running conventionally interactive processes, such as mediation, stakeholder dialogue, and facilitated public participation processes; secondly, on several years thinking and discussing how to use the opportunities presented by the advent of the Internet; and finally on two years of practical experience actually running electronic processes for a mixture of public, private and voluntary sector clients.

The emphasis here is on the conceptual challenges posed by electronic processes. The technical challenges are equally intense but follow on from the conceptual: it is only when the conceptual are thoroughly understood that the technical can be tackled.

This paper rests on two presuppositions. First, that the reader is already familiar with the theory, principles and practice of public consultation and participation; secondly, that he or she has available, or has access to, the appropriate technology and software to be able to follow the design and management advice offered here. If this is not the case, please contact the author (address at end) for advice and resource list.

The paper divides into the following sections:

2. **Minimum capabilities of an electronic consultation system**

This section summarises what an electronic consultation needs to be capable of if it is to exploit the potential benefits of electronic consultation.

3. **Design**

This section sets out the main dilemmas that have to be resolved during the design phase of an electronic consultation project.

4. **Process planning**

This covers the process of turning design into a practical plan.

5. **Managing responses**

This section contains some advice on the practicalities of managing responses to an electronic consultation process.

There is one final introductory point worth making. The virtual world, however well designed and managed, is no substitute for the real world. The best method of consulting people is to talk with them and record what they say. A long way second is asking people to tell you in writing about their interests and concerns. Both of these methods, though, can realistically involve only limited numbers of people.

We have to start realising that computers enable us to do things that would otherwise be impossible. The internet offers remarkable opportunities for consulting hundreds or thousands of people in a way that combines some of the virtues of real interaction, such as immediate feedback, with the disciplines of writing.

2. **Minimum necessary capabilities of an electronic consultation system**

The advent of the internet and modern data management systems adds another tool to the consultation toolbox: the ability to consult much larger numbers of people and manage both the process and the results at an acceptable cost in resources.

As yet this field is in its infancy, and undoubtedly there are methods and processes of consultation still to be invented. That said it is already apparent what electronic consultation processes can and need to be able to do if they are to be effective.

They need to do most if not all of the following:

- Enable participation from any e-mail/Internet enabled computer
- Be extremely easy to use even by people with little or no previous experience with computers
- Achieve both quantitative and qualitative results
- Allow detailed responses to written consultation processes
- Enable stakeholders to see their own and other participants' comments
- Enable those doing the consultation to collate and display the results of a consultation process within 7-10 days of its close
- Enable stakeholders to participate in an iterative process where successive stages of engagement allow participants to build on ideas and opinions expressed in earlier stages
- It should be possible for participants to be named or anonymous depending on which is appropriate for the process.

3. Design

There are five key factors that should shape the design of all consultation processes:

- the *purpose*: why you want it
- the *product*: what is to be produced
- the *people*: who is to be consulted about what
- the *pacing*: how to use the time available, and finally
- the *process*: how it is to be done.

These factors influence each other and have to be considered in parallel.

3.1 Purpose

As with any project, the first task is to agree its purpose. Electronic consultation is best used in any situation where the primary concern is to assemble large amounts of information from diverse sources, and to be able to present it back to those involved for further comment and elaboration.

It is useful, for example, to:

- improve proposals, policy-making and decision-making by seeking early input from stakeholders, particularly expert stakeholders
- minimise later disagreement by identifying potential problems with any proposals
- learn more about the impact of national proposals on local conditions
- promote a wider sense of ownership of proposals and increase their acceptability
- enable information to be pooled and shared
- gather ideas and perspectives that may have been overlooked
- demonstrate accountability and responsiveness
- expose peer groups to different points of view.

From the point of view of those being consulted, it can:

- provide a means for stakeholders to influence policy or decisions that may affect them
- ensure that minority interests are not overlooked
- enable consultees to offer advice, expertise and information to benefit others
- help people to learn from each other
- help those in authority to appreciate the possible impacts of policies and proposals, especially where these may be experienced by some as divisive, discriminatory or unreasonable.

Most consultation processes have more than one purpose, and this is also true of electronic consultation processes. The point always to remember, however, is that people's (often unconscious) expectation of anything electronic is that it will be easier and quicker than its non-electronic equivalent. This means that whatever you do, and with whatever purpose, has to be short, sharp, clear and absolutely to the point. Long explanations do not work. Ambiguous instructions will be rejected. It is so easy to click off.

3.2 Product

The single most important question to ask, from the first moment, is "*What specifically do you want to have at the end of this process that you don't have now?*" It is essential to know what type of output you are looking for – mutual understanding, better information, detailed comment – and direct every part of the process to achieve it.

It is also useful to know exactly what form the product will take: is it a two page summary or a twenty page paper? How will you know if you have 'mutual understanding' or 'better information'. Proper definition from the outset saves much trouble later.

3.3 People

The great advantage of the Internet over more traditional consultation media is that you can potentially reach many, many more people and not be swamped by the results – because your data management system will enable you to handle hundreds or thousands of submissions relatively painlessly.

So deciding the *number* of people you want to consult makes a good starting point. Is it fifty experts, five hundred major stakeholders, or five thousand members of the general public? If in doubt, go for the largest pool of stakeholders you can: the cost implications will generally be much less with electronic consultations than with conventional processes.

The next question is how you get people to participate. There are several options, for example:

- advertise the website and hope people go to it
- don't advertise it, but leave it where people are likely to find it
- send out large numbers of general invitations and hope a certain percentage decide to participate
- send out specific invitations to named individuals and actively encourage them to participate through the use of supporting materials, helplines and dedicated registration and security procedures.

Who participates also raises the question of representativeness. This has to be related to the purpose of the exercise. If the purpose is to generate ideas to be judged individually on their merits, then the balance of participation may be less important. If the exercise is designed to produce a quantitative result, akin to an opinion poll, then representativeness is vital and the recruitment of participants should be weighed and calculated accordingly.

Related to representation, and also very important, is the question of access. Although Internet access is continually growing, and is pretty much universal among professionals and organisations, it will never reach everybody. If you want to ensure participation by the elderly, or the very poor, or people with visual impairment or people speaking minority languages only, you have to think very seriously about whether an electronic consultation is appropriate.

If inclusiveness is important for the subject you are consulting on, and you definitely want to do at least some of it electronically, then you should think about local workshops, telephone calls, or even some form of written questionnaire to supplement the online process.

3.4 Pacing

The key to successful electronic consultation is maintaining the momentum of the process throughout; experience suggests that participation and pacing are inextricably linked.

This means that an iterative process, with people completing different tasks at short intervals, is most likely to keep participants' interest and encourage them to return and continue to participate. Having just one long session to allow wider participation carries the risk of people losing interest and never returning to see the results because the process becomes so drawn out.

In fact, the whole process should be established, conducted and concluded as quickly as possible. An undertaking that people will see a summary of the results within a week or two of the consultation ending also helps participation.

So the bias here is therefore towards a system that provides a series of time 'windows' kept open for two or three weeks, between which submissions are collated and structured ready for the following session. While a system using a forum approach, especially if properly moderated, may feel more spontaneous and more like a 'real' conversation, the relative lack of structure may make the results harder to appreciate and so discourage participation. Experience points to a number of conclusions:

- if an electronic consultation process involves named individuals it is much easier to encourage them to participate, and therefore each iteration of the process can be shorter
- time windows should ideally never be less than three weeks to allow for people being away on holiday
- reminders to participate, as well as periodic summaries of what has been said, encourage participation
- participation inevitably declines with each iteration, but can be reduced if people know the whole process is of limited duration.
- a rapid collation and presentation of the results of each iteration is essential to maintain momentum and participation levels.

3.5 Process

Many conventional consultation processes consist of asking people to respond to a written paper. There is a simple electronic equivalent of this: you send participants a copy of whatever document you are consulting on and ask them to complete an online questionnaire.

This is not, however, utilising the technology to best effect. A very simple variation on this, but one that produces much richer results, is to break a consultation document up into a series of short sections and ask participants an open question about each section. This has the advantage of allowing participants to determine their own responses rather than having to respond to pre-determined questions. The results can also be collated in different ways, allowing for easier cross-references to other sections of the document.

Another option is more radical still: setting out the broad scope and purpose of the consultation and asking participants, in one or two preliminary iterations, to identify and prioritise the issues they feel should be addressed in greater depth. This has the advantage that the participants feel they are addressing the issues that matter to *them* rather than to whomever initiated the consultation.

Consultation on some issues will also require the provision of background information. It is important to remember that the electronic environment may require a different approach to information. A long document may still be appropriate for some stakeholders, but others – accustomed to the sound-bites of television and the Internet - may prefer a shorter, sharper format using graphics, pictures, and charts. In due course, when broadband is more widely available, it may be that short films can also be used to liven up consultation processes.

Beware, though, making any presentation of information too slick. People do not trust glossy brochures and PR-speak. A presentation of the information in clear, factual terms is more valuable. If the issues involved are controversial, a presentation of them by a third party content expert may be more credible than by the problem holder's organisation.

An alternative is to create a core group of the project leader plus a range of stakeholders and seek agreement among them on what information should be produced or presentations developed to provide participants with the information they require.

4. Process planning

4.1 Outline planning

Electronic processes, like conventional processes, need to be planned in a way that enables you to see all the variables around of process, people, and product (which subsumes purpose) set against the invariables – usually time and budget.

Creating a simple grid around this structure is often helpful:

Process Planning Grid

Products						
People						
Process						
Budget						
Timeline	<i>Jan.</i>	<i>Feb.</i>	<i>March</i>	<i>April</i>	<i>May</i>	<i>etc</i>

The grid and the time line help you see the relationship of each part of the work to all the others, and to the time frame of the project. As the grid is completed, the inter-relationships of the component parts become even clearer as a tentative conclusion in one place necessitates a re-think of another somewhere else. As you work through each heading, you will revisit and move the work you have already done; project planning is always best done as a cyclic process.

Here is a checklist of the major things that may need to be discussed under each heading:

Products

Examples:

- Identification of issues
- Greater mutual understanding
- Detailed comments on document
- Wider ownership of a strategic plan
- Suggested actions.

People

Examples:

- Strategic stakeholders
- Academic experts
- Representatives of local groups.

Process

- Different steps/iterations
- Face-to-face preparation/follow-up meetings
- Presentation of background information
- Review of comments received
- Evaluation of process/products.

4.2 Detailed Planning

- Decide what products you need to have at the end of each iteration.

- ❑ Keep checking the overall timetable for the project at the same time as you plan each iteration. Take into account factors such as summer holidays when participation may be more difficult. Agree fixed time points such as the start and finish times of each step, and by when you will need to have background material, invitation letters, database of participants, summaries of progress etc.
- ❑ Define exactly what you will require from participants in each iteration. You are strongly advised to write out any instructions you intend to give or questions you want to ask and test them on yourself and on colleagues. They must be instantly comprehensible: in the online world people do not give you a second chance. Refine the wording of briefings and questions until it is certain that participants will know **what** you want at the end of each session, and **how** they are to achieve it.
- ❑ It is probably better to do all of the above *before* you send out invitations or background materials to participants. Change at any stage is liable to cause confusion. Invitation letters should state clearly what the process will achieve and why the person is being asked to participate. It should also indicate what sort of time commitment is required, and how the person's input will be used.
- ❑ Once participants have agreed to participate they should be given secure passwords and usernames.
- ❑ User support. Experience suggests that people divide evenly into those who appreciate detailed instructions on how to use an electronic consultation system, and those who feel they do not need it. On balance, it is probably better to offer it because a well-designed and presented briefing pack encourages participation. A telephone helpline is also a vital resource for some participants.
- ❑ Agree *process* steps such as evaluations or progress reviews.

5. Managing responses

One of the strengths of electronic consultation is that it enables very large numbers of people to produce vast quantities of responses without the initiators being overwhelmed by the results.

It is useful, as part of the design stage, to decide how to manage responses. To maintain the momentum of the consultation process, and the motivation of participants, responses should be collated and available for participants to review within a week to ten days of the end of each iteration.

The larger the number of responses, the more important it is to collate them in ways that allow participants both to find their own responses quickly, and to be able to search for responses on other aspects of the subject that interest them. The data management system should allow a number of options for collation, for example:

- By participant
- Alphabetically
- Grouped by subject
- Grouped by themes where a number of subjects are related
- By priorities
- By types of information, argument, evidence, opinion or recommendation.

Finally, it is not unusual for consultation responses to be difficult to understand, so a simple system for e-mailing a participant directly to request clarification is also extremely useful.

How the information is to be reported should also influence how it is collated. If a summary is to be prepared, for example, then the facilitator needs to be able to create a balanced overview of responses under each appropriate heading – and this means collating responses

in a way that indicates the major arguments, for example, for and against a particular proposition.

It also means being able to check that the summary is balanced in its presentation of the responses, which in turn means being able to read all the responses sufficiently swiftly to get an overall impression.

He or she may also wish to quote particular responses to illustrate various arguments, so ideally it should be possible to copy and paste responses directly into the summary document.

One final aspect of response is the evaluation process, which is important as the technology for electronic consultation is relatively novel. The final iteration of any process should always include a number of simple questions that rat the process in terms of is clarity, relevance, ease of use etc.

Conclusion

Electronic consultation and public participation processes offer opportunities to involve large numbers of people in discussing issues and ideas. The revolution in information and communication technologies that makes such opportunities possible is still very new, and we will undoubtedly see further developments and more opportunities in the coming years.

It is already clear from experience to date, however, that providing the technology is used well, and its limitations as well as its strengths properly appreciated, it can add a new dimension to the way in which the public, private and voluntary sector organisations relate to their staff, members and stakeholders.

It is Dialogue by Design's hope that our practical experience in this field can be pooled with that of others, and that through intelligent collaboration we can ensure the technology is used to best advantage.

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