

Hitching a Wagon to E-Government

The Nova Scotia Business Registry aligns three government organizations to deliver a higher level of service to businesses in the province.

We all know what it means to put the cart before the horse. That's the situation many governments find themselves in as they struggle to reorganize to accommodate electronic government.

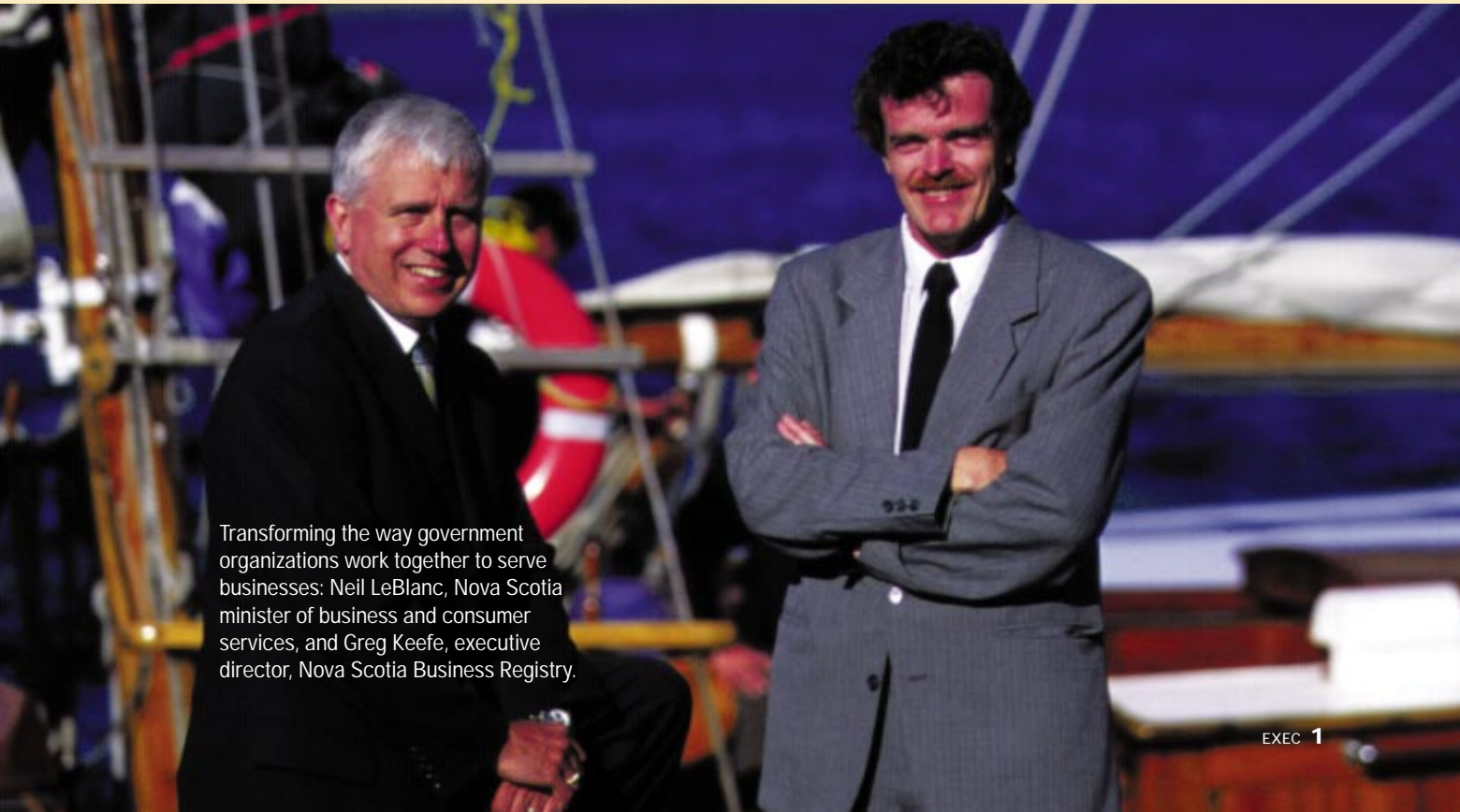
But in Nova Scotia, they're getting things in the right order. Over the past two years, an initiative called the Nova Scotia Business Registry (NSBR) has been transforming the way government organizations work together to serve businesses in Nova Scotia. The result is a higher level of service — and the ability for NSBR to move to electronic service delivery without upsetting the apple cart.

“NSBR is about more than just delivering service,” says Greg Keefe, executive director of NSBR. “It's about government organizations working together to deliver better services.” And because NSBR has already broken down walls between agencies, “we're now prepared to begin electronic delivery of services,” says Keefe.

E-Triumvirate

NSBR is a joint initiative of a federal agency, the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency; a provincial agency, the Workers Compensation Board of Nova Scotia; and a provincial department, the Nova Scotia Department

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Transforming the way government organizations work together to serve businesses: Neil LeBlanc, Nova Scotia minister of business and consumer services, and Greg Keefe, executive director, Nova Scotia Business Registry.

of Business and Consumer Services. NSBR provides a single place for Nova Scotia businesses to handle registrations, licenses and permits, and make payments relating to those transactions.

“Businesses can use the NSBR to handle a range of registrations and licenses,” says Neil LeBlanc, Nova Scotia minister of business and consumer services. “They don’t need to understand the internal structure of government or know which form comes from which organization.” That streamlines processes for businesses and governments alike. Businesses needn’t navigate complex government structures, and government can collect information once and use it for a variety of purposes.

Because sharing of electronic information is at the heart of NSBR, the initiative began by creating policies that would allow that to happen. For example, before NSBR, each agency assigned businesses a different ID number — and sometimes different numbers for different purposes. So a given business could end up with five or six ID numbers, making information sharing difficult.

Now, the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency assigns each business a single ID number, which the Workers Compensation Board and the Department of Business and Consumer Services also use. That consolidates processes and simplifies the enforcement of regulations across agencies.

In addition, NSBR has become the repository for “tombstone” data such as mailing addresses and phone numbers for all Nova Scotia businesses. So if a record is changed with one agency, the information is updated for all agencies. At the same time, sensitive information such as tax data is not shared and remains protected.

To the Web and Beyond
NSBR was enabled through the integration of existing hardware and software, including the province’s

accounting systems. The next step is to take that technology infrastructure to the Web. Starting this fall, businesses will be able to access all NSBR services over the Internet. “The Internet will enable us to provide true 24x7 access,” says Keefe. “It will also help us provide a more uniform level of service, since physical location will no longer be a factor.”

In moving to cyberspace, NSBR will take advantage of the technology infrastructure of Atlantic Canada On-Line (ACOL), a unique partnership between Unisys and four Canadian provinces that allows Web access to certain government information. ACOL will act as the front end for NSBR and will also handle online payments.

Keefe is quick to point out that technology alone isn’t the secret to NSBR. “We also had to integrate the three organizations culturally,” he says. “Each had its own time frames, its own decision-making processes, its own goals and objectives. Aligning them was not always easy.” The solution was to create a steering committee with representation from all three organizations. “Unisys provided a lot of support in helping us navigate that,” Keefe reports.

Keefe’s advice to other organizations looking at e-government? “Partner with other agencies to share costs,” he says. “You’ll also find synergies that will improve service to your constituencies.”

LeBlanc concurs, and adds: “Look for ways you can be creative and innovative. We’re finding that the projects we’ve put online can be expanded to other important areas that government should be concerned with, like education and healthcare. And as we deploy these technologies, we’re uncovering more and more growth opportunities for the private sector.”

—Eric Schoeniger