



**NEW
DIRECTIONS**

**NOUVELLES
DIRECTIONS**

To Better Serve Canadians: How Technology is Changing the Relationship Between Members of Parliament and Public Servants

Jonathan Malloy

NO. 9

**TO BETTER SERVE CANADIANS: HOW TECHNOLOGY IS
CHANGING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEMBERS OF
PARLIAMENT AND PUBLIC SERVANTS**

A “PURPLE ZONE” PROJECT

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Abstract

Cette étude examine et rapporte comment les nouvelles technologies de l'information et des communications (TIC) sont entrain de changer les rapports entre les députés et les fonctionnaires au sein du gouvernement du Canada. Basée sur des sondages ainsi que des entretiens qualitatifs, elle défend que les TIC ont des incidences importantes sur la façon dont les députés et leur personnel interagissent avec les fonctionnaires, et qu'elle auront vraisemblablement des répercussions encore plus grandes dans l'avenir. Le rapport explore les raisons qui motivent ces choix et les moyens pouvant aider les élus et les fonctionnaires à mieux utiliser le courrier électronique et Internet. C'est ce thème - comment les députés et les fonctionnaires peuvent travailler ensemble pour offrir un meilleur service aux Canadiens et Canadiennes - qui est à la base de ce rapport.

This is a study of the changing relationships between Members of Parliament and public servants, and the role of new Information and Communication Technology in those changes. Based on sample surveys and qualitative interviews, the study observes significant impacts on those relationships. However, these impacts have been moderated by organizational and institutional conventions – most notably the broad principle of ministerial responsibility. Online document transfer and e-mail are found to be two particularly underutilized applications that could build a stronger, more direct, relation between MPs and civil servants. It's suggested that enhancing these relationships is important to better serve Canadians.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study investigates and reports on how new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are changing the relationship between members of Parliament and public servants in the Government of Canada. Based on sample surveys of members and their staff, along with qualitative interviews, it argues that ICTs have had significant effects on how members and their staff interact with public servants and that ICTs are likely to have even greater impact in the future.

However, it is not clear that this impact will substantively *transform* this relationship without the presence of larger shifts in organizational and institutional norms and assumptions. While there is no doubt that ICTs are changing the relationship between members and public servants, their potential is moderated by important institutional and other variables – most notably the broad principle of ministerial responsibility that may steer both groups to rely on ministers’ offices rather than on the cultivation of direct relationships.

New technologies hold considerable potential to change the daily work of MPs and the ability of both elected officials and public servants to serve Canadians. Information and communication technologies already assist parliamentarians to keep in touch with each other and with their staff; however, there is still much untapped potential. For example, most MPs report that they communicate mainly with public servants by telephone or face-to-face, with e-mail well behind in frequency of use. This report explores the reasons for this and how e-mail and the Internet could be better utilized by elected officials and public servants. It also explores how the ability to easily transfer complex documents on-line can allow MPs and their staff to better communicate with constituents and public servants.

This investigation of both current and potential use of ICTs is important for several reasons. It not only extends our knowledge of the impacts of technology in Canadian public affairs but provides specific and original data on the role of ICTs in the largely unexplored area of politician-public servant relations. This allows us to understand more thoroughly how recent technologies allow members and public servants to deliver improved services and how they could make even greater contributions in the future. It is this theme – how MPs and public servants can work together to better serve Canadians – that underlies this report.

SOMMAIRE EXÉCUTIF

Cette étude examine et rapporte comment les nouvelles technologies de l'information et des communications (TIC) sont entrain de changer les rapports entre les députés et les fonctionnaires au sein du gouvernement du Canada. Basée sur des sondages conduits auprès des députés et de leur personnel ainsi que des entretiens qualitatifs, elle défend que les TIC ont des incidences importantes sur la façon dont les députés et leur personnel interagissent avec les fonctionnaires, et qu'elles auront vraisemblablement des répercussions encore plus grandes dans l'avenir.

Cependant, il n'est pas évident que ces incidences *transformeront* considérablement ces rapports sans changements plus conséquents dans les normes organisationnelles et institutionnelles et les prises en charge. Sans aucun doute, les TIC changent les rapports entre les députés et les fonctionnaires, mais leur potentiel est contrôlé par d'importantes mesures institutionnelles et autres – en particulier le principe général de la responsabilité ministérielle qui peut forcer les deux groupes à s'appuyer sur les cabinets de ministres au lieu de cultiver des rapports directs.

Les nouvelles technologies peuvent considérablement changer la vie des députés dans leurs fonctions quotidiennes et les capacités tant des élus que des fonctionnaires au service des Canadiens et des Canadiennes. Les TIC aident déjà les parlementaires à communiquer entre eux et avec leur personnel. Néanmoins, une bonne part de leur potentiel est encore inexploitée. Par exemple, les députés, pour la plupart, rapportent qu'ils communiquent avec les fonctionnaires surtout par téléphone ou en personne, le courrier électronique prenant une place secondaire. Le rapport explore les raisons qui motivent ces choix et les moyens pouvant aider les élus et les fonctionnaires à mieux utiliser le courrier électronique et Internet. Il examine également comment la capacité de transmettre facilement des documents complexes en ligne peut permettre aux députés et à leur personnel de communiquer plus efficacement avec les électeurs et les fonctionnaires.

Cet examen de l'utilisation actuelle et éventuelle des TIC est important pour plusieurs raisons. Non seulement il étend notre savoir des incidences de la technologie sur les affaires publiques canadiennes, mais il présente aussi des données précises et originales sur le rôle des TIC dans le domaine, en grande partie inexploité, des relations entre politiciens et fonctionnaires. Il nous invite à mieux comprendre comment les récentes technologies permettent aux députés et aux fonctionnaires d'offrir des services plus efficaces, et comment elles peuvent apporter des contributions encore plus grandes dans l'avenir. C'est ce thème – comment les députés et les fonctionnaires peuvent travailler ensemble pour offrir un meilleur service aux Canadiens et Canadiennes – qui est à la base de ce rapport.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Study

This study investigates and reports on how new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are changing the relationship between members of Parliament and public servants in the Government of Canada. Based on sample surveys of members and their staff, qualitative interviews, and the proceedings of a roundtable discussion between MPs and public servants, it argues that ICTs have had significant effects on how members and their staff interact with public servants and that ICTs are likely to have even greater impact in the future. However, it is not clear that this impact will substantively *transform* this relationship without the presence of larger shifts in organizational and institutional norms and assumptions.

This study is part of the Institute of Public Administration's "Purple Zone" project, which is dedicated to exploring the connecting area between politicians and public servants. It investigates a number of important issues, including the current use of technology by MPs and their staff and the ways in which members and staff interact with public servants. It then combines these two areas to see how technology is changing the relationship. In particular, we focus on members' roles as constituency "ombudsmen"¹ handling constituent inquiries and requests for assistance in their dealings with government and the impact of ICTs. The study finds important technological developments, such as a heavy reliance by constituency staff on government web sites for information and the importance of faxes for transferring constituents' documents. Yet, in other ways, technology does not seem to have as great an impact as one would expect – for example, e-mail is a distinctly secondary medium of communication with public servants for both members and staff.

While there is no doubt that ICTs are changing the relationship between members and public servants, their potential is moderated by important institutional and other variables – most notably the broad principle of ministerial responsibility, which may steer both groups to rely on ministers' offices rather than on the cultivation of direct relationships. Many of the legislators polled suggested that new technologies are unlikely to change their relationships with public servants without broader changes in attitudes that allow deeper and more familiar relationships to develop. Furthermore, we must not overlook the role of legislative staff when discussing how technology is affecting the relationship between MPs and public servants. It is staff who handle much of the information flowing between the two groups and who are often most conversant and familiar with ICTs. They are thus a crucial link in the relationship and an important variable affecting the potential of new technologies.

This leads to the conclusion that while ICTs are *changing* the relationship between parliamentarians and public servants, they are unlikely to *transform* the relationship without larger political and

institutional changes. It is important to investigate and discuss both these current technological developments and the possibility of larger institutional changes, for several reasons. Not only can we extend our knowledge of the impacts of technology in Canadian public affairs and of the relationships between politicians and public servants, but we can understand more thoroughly how technologies are allowing members and public servants to deliver improved services. It is this last theme – how MPs and public servants can work together to better serve Canadians – that underlies this report.

The New Service

Service is in. One of the key goals of the recent upheavals in the public administration world has been the improvement of the relationship between governments and citizens, whether in delivering programs or simply listening to views and concerns. In some cases this has led to considerable changes in the way public services are delivered; but often it has been a case of correcting stereotypes and incorrect assumptions about bureaucratic efficiency. The results for Canadian public services have been very encouraging; recent surveys and studies have shown increases in the already high levels of public confidence in government services.

The emphasis on service is of course intertwined with great technological changes. Information technology has had a profound impact on Canada's social, economic and political systems over the last decade. As a result, institutions, both private and public, are being forced to reinvent themselves. Interaction is increasingly through networks of information and communication technology, and government is no exception. Canadian governments at all levels have initiated numerous and far-reaching technological initiatives to improve internal processes and operations as well as to better serve Canadians.

More and more government services are being offered on-line; public servants are able to communicate and share information with each other much more quickly; and citizens have more routes than ever through which to communicate their views. Not surprisingly, there have been growing pains. But it is obvious that ICTs are a fundamental component of the new service agenda and are quickly changing the ways in which public servants do business.

The Role of Legislators

What is not so obvious is the role of elected representatives in this agenda of improved service assisted by new technologies. The emphasis of recent changes has been on improving the relationship between public servants and citizens, whether through technological innovations or broader changes in attitudes and focus. Little has been said about the role elected officials might play in this particular context. While there has been considerable discussion about “e-democracy” and legislators’ use of technology to communicate with Canadians, there has been less focus on how technology is affecting relationships between legislators and public servants.

Yet, legislators have long played important and central roles in the relationship between citizens and governments. Even though it has been common to speak in recent years about “the decline of Parliament,” legislators continue to be important links between Canadians and their public services in many ways. In their committee – and for opposition members, critic – roles, MPs and MLAs directly interact with public servants in significant ways, scrutinizing legislation and government activities and generating new policy ideas and directions. And in their constituencies, legislators have an even more fundamental role, assisting both groups and individuals in their interactions with government.

The “ombudsman” function for MPs (and MLAs) is a fundamental and distinctive characteristic of Canadian politics. Canadian legislators as a whole appear to devote more time and effort to constituency affairs than, for example, British MPs do, and they enjoy greater resources with which to do so.² Whether it is checking the progress of immigration applications, seeking repairs for a local wharf, or tracking a lost pension cheque, legislators and their staffs are an important aspect of delivering services to Canadians. Furthermore, MPs appear to consider this activity among the most important and fulfilling of their roles as parliamentarians.³

New Technologies and Democracy

In addition to changing the way public services are delivered, the new information and communication technologies are having profound effects on Canadian democracy as a whole, including the roles of elected representatives. Many legislators’ offices receive over a hundred e-mail messages a day – many of which are identical form letters on policy issues, but there are also numerous individual messages of concerns, complaints and queries from constituents. Fax machines and toll-free numbers for constituency offices are also important methods of communication, all in addition to the still significant stream of regular letters arriving in the post.

The availability of so many media for communicating with legislators appears to have increased their overall workload – in other words, Canadians are not simply using different methods to communicate but are communicating more overall. Furthermore, the speed of the new technologies appears to have increased constituents’ expectations; since they can send messages almost instantly, many expect not only rapid acknowledgement of their messages but also the resolution of their concerns within hours or days. This may create increased pressures, particularly on legislators’ staff, since while technology allows faster and easier communication, it cannot necessarily solve problems more quickly.

On the other hand, the new technologies also hold great promise for bringing the above two dynamics – the increased emphasis on service and MPs’ traditional “ombudsman” roles – closer together. The advantages of rapid communication, and particularly for the secure and rapid transfer of complex information and documents between constituents, legislators and public servants, could create a dramatically increased role for legislators in the delivery of public services to Canadians.

This study focuses on this promise, studying the current state of affairs and anticipating future trends. At the same time, the study also raises important questions of accountability and responsibility, suggesting that these key principles may deter such changes, despite the technological possibilities. However, we must continue to emphasize these issues. Technological innovations will not alone determine the relationship between elected officials and public servants, but they cannot be ignored or avoided either. Given the tremendous investment in ICT solutions by all Canadian governments, legislators must be alert to both the positive and negative implications for their roles as elected officials and to the ultimate consequences for all Canadians.

MPs and Constituent Service

Members of Parliament represent the concerns and views of their constituents to Parliament and ministers, but they – particularly government members – also represent the federal government and its policies to constituents, explaining policies and clarifying decisions. This two-way role, of course, means that MPs are important intermediaries between government and citizens, not just for concerns about public issues and policies but also for the delivery of services. And although members of Parliament have always acted as intermediaries between Ottawa and their local constituencies, the nature of this role has changed over the years.

In the past, MPs played important roles as dispensers of patronage and other funds to their constituencies. This has of course declined considerably, and most Canadians disapprove of this function, so that while members continue to have some influence in the dispensing of minor grants and short-term positions, their role and its scope are quite marginal and relatively insignificant compared to that in the past. But as their patronage role dwindled over the years, MPs acquired a newer function – that of constituency “ombudsmen” who intervene on behalf of individual constituents in their dealings with government.

While members have always dealt with individual inquiries and concerns, the second half of the twentieth century saw a rapid increase in the “ombudsman” function. Prior to the 1960s, being a member of Parliament was normally a part-time position, and MPs were paid and resourced accordingly. Members spent only a few months of the year in Ottawa and had little in the way of staff or office resources. They dealt with only the occasional letter or inquiry about individual cases and were usually able to manage the workload by themselves.

It is almost certainly no coincidence that, as the services and size of government grew, constituent inquiries also increased. Former MP Gordon Aiken wrote in 1974 that “[f]ederal members only recently got into the wholesale business of mediator between constituent and government. Formerly they were most concerned with general policies.”⁴ As government grew more complex, more and more Canadians turned to their MPs for assistance in navigating the bureaucracy. As a result, more and more of MPs’ time was devoted to constituency casework. At the same time, the increase in government bills, committee business and other parliamentary activity meant Parliament sat for

longer periods. These two factors together began to turn the position of member into a full-time job, and MPs began to secure staff and office resources to help them cope with the workload.

All members of Parliament now maintain one or more offices in their constituencies, usually with two or more full-time staff, who spend nearly all their time on individual constituent case files. Some members also use their staff in Ottawa to work on constituent cases, although this varies considerably.

David Docherty's research has found that most members clearly relish the responsibility of helping constituents. Docherty writes that "[o]f all the responsibilities of members of parliament, constituency service is the activity that is foremost in the minds of most representatives"⁵ and is the activity most valued and enjoyed by backbench members.⁶ According to Docherty, "local work brings about concrete results, be they instantaneous – a constituent leaves the office satisfied with their problem now resolved – or part of a longer harder process – the turning of sod at a community centre provided in part by federal funds."⁷

Helping ordinary Canadians sort out problems with government is not only personally satisfying but helps MPs build their constituency profile and local support at election time. Some MPs, particularly newly elected ones, appear less happy with this role – though few may say so publicly, many members feel that they have been elected to influence national public policy and not simply to track down lost cheques. Nevertheless, the majority of veteran members of Parliament appear to place a high priority on the ombudsman role. In a survey of the 34th Parliament (1988–93), members ranked "helping people who have personal problems with government" as the most important of their roles as MPs.⁸

Members of Parliament are often careful to note that their role as constituency ombudsmen is not to seek favours or contravene established procedures. Rather, it is to address misunderstandings and errors or resolve complex situations. As former MP Peter McCreath writes, "[y]our job as MP is not to see that people get the benefits and services from government that they want; it is to see that they get the benefits and services that the law provides and to which they are entitled."⁹

In turn, Canadians appear to be satisfied with the assistance provided by members. Docherty notes that although most Canadians are initially sceptical about the ability of MPs to render assistance, "a strong majority of those who seek help [from MPs] with a personal problem leave the member's office very satisfied" and that "many businesses would be extraordinarily happy with this type of client response."¹⁰

But despite its clear importance and increasing profile, MPs' constituency service has never been investigated as an aspect of the overall delivery of public services to Canadians. This is perhaps understandable since, by their nature, constituent cases are exceptional and a very small number of the total interactions between the Government of Canada and Canadians. But their number is not negligible – most members deal with hundreds of cases every year and some departments annually receive thousands of inquiries routed through members from constituents. Furthermore, many or

most of these inquiries are routine rather than unique, particularly in immigration matters where, as we will see, the role of MPs has in some ways been institutionalized and integrated into the overall process of inquiries and case-tracking.

This role and the prospects for even greater integration into the service-delivery framework bear inquiry. Furthermore, few questions have been asked about how this ombudsman role has been affected by the technological revolution and the implications for the delivery of public services to Canadians. In the following chapters, we begin to ask and answer these questions.

CHAPTER 2

THE SURVEYS

The major findings of this study are based on three survey instruments.¹¹ First, twenty-eight members of Parliament from across the country and all political parties were personally interviewed and asked a standard set of questions. Second and third, members' staff from both the House of Commons and constituency offices were asked to complete and return a written questionnaire about their interaction with public servants. All surveys comprised a mix of closed and open-ended questions. In this chapter, we describe the survey methodology and survey sample.

Further information was gathered from a roundtable discussion held in October 2002 in Ottawa featuring a number of MPs and public servants. The participants had an opportunity to read a draft version of this report and heard a presentation of its initial findings. Their discussions and comments were invaluable in the preparation of this final version.

MP Surveys

Letters were sent to all MPs informing them of the study and inviting their participation. Follow-up inquiries were made by telephone and fax to approximately 125 backbenchers, and twenty-eight were interviewed either in person or by telephone. (Two members' offices responded to the initial letter, in both cases to say they would not take part.) Party leaders, cabinet ministers and secretaries of state, house leaders, whips and the Speaker and deputy speakers were not contacted, as the study was to focus on the experience of backbench MPs, of whom there are about 250 at any given time.

The sample of twenty-eight out of approximately 260 is not particularly large but reflects the increasing problem of "interview and survey fatigue" in the study of the House of Commons and legislatures more generally.¹² As David Docherty has noted, members of Parliament receive an increasing number of such inquiries, so that many MPs are "getting tired of questionnaires and interview requests."¹³ This was evident for this study, particularly in the very high number of unreturned telephone calls. In three cases, meetings were arranged with members, but when the researcher arrived they were asked to speak to staff instead, despite a previous understanding that the interview was with the MP personally. (Attempts to re-schedule were unsuccessful.) Furthermore, one political party appears to have a formal policy that all research requests must be approved by the caucus leadership; this created a significant delay.

The follow-up inquiries to MPs outside Quebec consisted of at least three telephone calls and at least one faxed letter. Members were initially contacted on a random basis – for example, by letter of alphabet of their last name – although later requests focused on underrepresented provincial, party and gender groups. Similar efforts were made for MPs in Quebec. However, the most effective way of securing interviews was through introductions by other MPs, and a large proportion of interviews were secured at least partially by this method.¹⁴

Particular care was given to ensure provincial, partisan and gender balance. Members from one territory and all provinces except New Brunswick were interviewed. (Despite numerous attempts, no interview could be arranged with N.B. MPs.) Distribution by party was roughly equivalent to their number of seats, while women are slightly overrepresented (25%) relative to their numbers in the House (20%). Other variables including age, year elected, and urban/mixed/rural ridings were also roughly proportionate. However, French-speaking MPs are underrepresented, as are those who are anglophone in Quebec and those who are francophone outside of Quebec; five interviews were conducted in French, all with Quebec MPs, while twenty-eight were in English, all with members outside Quebec. Relatedly, compared to their populations, Ontario and Quebec are slightly underrepresented compared to Western and Atlantic Canada. Tables 1 to 5 break down the sample by party, gender, age, province and type of riding.

Table 1. *Members Surveyed, by Party*

<i>Liberal</i>	15	53.6%
<i>Alliance*</i>	6	21.4%
<i>Bloc québécois</i>	3	10.7%
<i>New Democratic Party</i>	2	7.1%
<i>Progressive Conservative</i>	2	7.1%

*One MP was a member of the Democratic Representative Caucus but is now again a member of the Canadian Alliance caucus.

Table 2. *Members Surveyed, by Gender*

<i>Male</i>	21	75%
<i>Female</i>	7	25%

Table 3. *Members Surveyed, by Age*

<i>25 to 35</i>	4	14.3%
<i>36 to 45</i>	7	25.0%
<i>46 to 55</i>	10	35.7%
<i>56 to 65</i>	3	10.7%
<i>Age not given/unavailable</i>	4	14.3%

Table 4. *Members Surveyed, by Province*

<i>B.C.</i>	3	10.7%
<i>Alberta</i>	2	7.1%
<i>Saskatchewan</i>	1	3.6%
<i>Manitoba</i>	3	10.7%
<i>Ontario</i>	6	21.4%
<i>Quebec</i>	5	17.9%
<i>PEI</i>	2	7.1%
<i>Nfld + Lab</i>	2	7.1%
<i>Nova Scotia</i>	3	10.7%
<i>Territories</i>	1	3.6%

Table 5. *Members Surveyed, by Type*

<i>Urban</i>	12	42.9%
<i>Mixed urban/rural</i>	10	35.7%
<i>Rural</i>	6	21.4%

Although the sample of MPs is not large, it is a reasonably accurate reflection of the membership of the House. And, as we will see in the study, it is possible to draw many substantive and valid conclusions from members' responses. In some answers, trends were so clear that there was little difficulty in drawing conclusions; in other cases, responses were so mixed that it was equally possible to make one as another interpretation. However, throughout the survey, care was taken to not make unwarranted conclusions when the data was less than overwhelmingly clear, and survey findings have been presented as clearly and fully as possible so readers can make their own analysis.

Staff Surveys

Following the interview, members were given surveys for both their House of Commons office and their constituency office(s). Staff were asked to complete surveys on behalf of their office as a whole – rather than based on their individual experiences – and to return the surveys by mail. Unfortunately, the response rate was under half: fifteen completed surveys were received from Commons staff, and twelve from constituency offices.

To encourage candour, staff were not asked to give their member's name but merely to give their party affiliation and their type of riding. (This prevented follow-up on unreturned surveys). Tables 6 to 9 show the breakdown for staff surveys.

Table 6. House of Commons Office Survey, by Member's Party (n=15)

<i>Liberal</i>	7	46.7%
<i>Alliance</i>	3	20.0%
<i>Bloc québécois</i>	3	20.0%
<i>Progressive Conservative</i>	1	6.7%
<i>New Democratic Party</i>	—	—
<i>None given</i>	1	6.7%

Table 7. House of Commons Office Survey, by Type of Riding (n=15)

<i>Urban</i>	5	33.3%
<i>Mixed urban/rural</i>	8	53.3%
<i>Rural</i>	1	6.7%
<i>No response</i>	1	6.7%

Table 8. Constituency Office Survey, by Member's Party (n=12)

<i>Liberal</i>	7	58.3%
<i>Alliance</i>	4	33.3%
<i>Bloc québécois</i>	1	8.3%
<i>Progressive Conservative</i>	—	—
<i>New Democratic Party</i>	—	—

Table 9. Constituency Office Survey, by Type of Riding (n=12)

<i>Urban</i>	5	41.7%
<i>Mixed urban/rural</i>	7	58.3%
<i>Rural</i>	—	—

Obviously the staff surveys comprise a very small sample. Accordingly, data from the staff surveys is reported less often than members' responses, and conclusions are drawn with extreme caution. However, once again, a substantive amount of information can be drawn from the staff surveys and particularly from the open-ended responses.

Conclusion

To sum up, the surveys on which much of this study is based comprise a relatively small sample of all MPs and their offices, despite considerable efforts to survey as many MPs as possible. However, the members' surveys in particular represent a reasonable balance of demographic characteristics and were conducted in as random a method as possible. As we will see in subsequent chapters, a very substantive amount of information and conclusions can be drawn from these surveys, through both their open responses to open-ended and closed-questions. And, as stated, throughout the study, survey data is presented transparently and as fully as possible, so that readers can draw their own conclusions.

CHAPTER 3

MPS AND TECHNOLOGY

Before discussing how ICTs are affecting the relationship between MPs and public servants, we should establish the level and nature of technology used by members and their staff. This chapter reviews to what extent technology is used by the members and staff in our survey and, more importantly, in what ways. This allows some preliminary discussion of how ICTs are used in interactions with public servants and connects with the next chapter's analysis of MPs' overall relations with public servants and the role of technology. In Chapter 5, we will discuss initiatives among certain members for databases, virtual offices and other more advanced uses of technology.

MPs and Internet Technology

All members of Parliament have access to a wide range of current technologies, including mobile phones, computers and software, as well as training to use these ICTs. But how familiar are MPs with information and communication technologies, particularly those pertaining to the Internet? The members in our survey sample were reasonably comfortable with modern technologies, but a significant minority did not use ICTs either by choice or for other reasons.

Tables 10 through 13 focus on MPs' use of e-mail, the Internet and personal digital assistants. As the data show, a quarter of the members in our sample do not use e-mail regularly, and a significant minority do not use the Internet.

Table 10. *Do You Personally Use E-mail? (n=28)*

<i>Yes</i>	21	75%
<i>No</i>	7	25%

Table 11. *Do You Use the Internet for Your Work as an MP? (n=28)*

<i>Yes</i>	19	67.9%
<i>No</i>	9	32.1%

N.B. Two MPs said they did not use e-mail but did use the Internet for their work as an MP. It is possible the MPs meant that their staff, rather than they themselves personally, use the Internet.

Table 12. *Do You Use the Internet for Your Personal Affairs (Shopping, Banking, etc.)?* (n=28)

<i>Yes</i>	18	64.3%
<i>No</i>	8	28.6%
<i>No answer/Not sure</i>	2	7.1%

Table 13. *Do You Have and Use a Personal Digital Assistant (Palm Pilot, Blackberry, etc.)?* (n=28)

<i>Yes</i>	13	46.4%
<i>No</i>	13	46.4%
<i>Have one but not set up</i>	2	7.1%

Possible Explanations for Use of Technology

Age

What variables might explain an MP’s relative use of technology? An intuitive factor might be age. But while age appears to be a factor for this very small sample, it is less important for *using e-mail* than for *use of the Internet* in the MP’s work. Using coding categories of ages 25–35, 36–45, 46–55 and 56–65, we see inconclusive results for use of e-mail – in fact, in this sample, middle-aged MPs are actually more likely than some of their younger colleagues to use e-mail (Table 14).

Table 14. *Do You Use E-mail?* (n=24)

<i>Age</i>	<i>25–35</i>	<i>36–45</i>	<i>46–55</i>	<i>56–65</i>
<i>Yes</i>	3	4	9	1
<i>No</i>	1	3	1	2
<i>Total</i>	4	7	10	3

Note: Age data is missing for four MPs.

However, when asked whether they used the Internet for their work as an MP, we see that all the younger MPs do use it, while all MPs over fifty-five do not (Table 15). (To illustrate the differences between these two questions, one MP reported that she personally accessed her e-mail on a daily basis and that “I can’t imagine not having e-mail,” but she never used the World Wide Web.) Other variables such as party, region or type of riding did not yield significant explanations for varying use of technologies. Of course, the small sample size precludes us from drawing definite conclusions regarding the effect of these factors on ICT use.

Table 15. *Do You Use the Internet for Your Work as an MP? (n=24)*

<i>Age</i>	<i>25–35</i>	<i>36–45</i>	<i>46–55</i>	<i>56–65</i>
<i>Yes</i>	4	5	8	0
<i>No</i>	0	2	2	3
<i>Total</i>	4	7	10	3

Personal Choice

While we cannot fully dismiss variables such as age, party, region, they do not appear to affect MPs’ use of technology. Are there other explanations for members’ choices? In the Canadian population as a whole, Internet use is correlated not only with age but with education, income, occupation and other socio-economic variables. But for MPs, who are by definition socio-political élites and generally share similar socio-economic characteristics, the use of ICTs generally appears to be much more of a personal choice. In other words, these members may be perfectly familiar and knowledgeable about their technological options, but choose not to use them.

Several members indicated that they had at least some familiarity with ICTs and appreciated their conveniences, but they also found ICTs impersonal and avoided using them for that reason. One MP said he did not use e-mail because it “takes time away from things I should be doing as a politician” – such as personal contact on the telephone or meetings in person. However, the member added that he expected his staff to make full use of ICTs, as it “produces much more efficiency.” This appeared to be the case for several other MPs. Another member called himself a “Luddite” (in response to a different question) and said “I’m fighting it [the use of technology] all the way.” Yet the member acknowledged that “technology speeds things up ... [people] can get home faster and spend more time at home.”

Comparable and systematic data on how Canadian MPs compare to other legislators is difficult to obtain, but it may be that Canadian legislators are more technology-savvy than others. For example, Melissa Marschall and Wayne Curtin found in a 1999 survey that over half of all American congressional representatives never used the Internet in their work and that an even larger majority used it for only a very few activities (no data was available on their personal use of the Internet).¹⁵ While comparatively old information, these data suggest that Canadian MPs are not comparative laggards in their use of technology.

Thus, while most members in our sample use current technologies, a significant minority do not. Evidence suggests that ICT use depends more on personal choice than on other variables and that at least some MPs are reluctant to use them for reasons other than simple unfamiliarity.

Members' Staff and Technology

In addition to knowing how MPs use technology, we of course need to know how their staff make use of it. As noted above, even MPs who were reluctant to use technology themselves insisted that their staff be fully conversant with ICTs.

Naturally, computers are a basic part of the workplace of an MP's office – eleven of twelve constituency staff and fourteen of House of Commons staff reported that they had a computer with Internet access. (Although staff were asked to fill out the survey *as an office*, we hypothesize that the lone respondents without computers answered as individuals, and their offices as a whole do have computers and Internet access.) The Internet is central to the staff's work, as one question shows (Table 16).

Table 16. *How Important is the Internet in Your Work in the House of Commons Office? (n=15)*

<i>Not very important</i>	1	6.7%
<i>Important</i>	1	6.7%
<i>Very important</i>	3	20.0%
<i>Absolutely critical</i>	10	66.7%

Because it was assumed staff were largely conversant with basic computer and Internet skills, questions focused more directly on the purposes for which ICTs, particularly e-mail, were used. Tables 17 and 8 report on the use of e-mail in both Ottawa and constituency offices.

Table 17. *In What Ways do You and Other Members of the House of Commons Office Staff Use E-mail as Part of Your Work (Check all that Apply)? (n=15)*

<i>With other members' offices</i>	15	100%
<i>With the constituency office</i>	14	93.3%
<i>With non-partisan parliamentary staff</i>	13	86.7%
<i>With constituents</i>	11	73.3%
<i>With party leader/whip's office</i>	11	73.3%
<i>With public servants</i>	8	53.3%
<i>With the member</i>	7	46.7%
<i>Other ways/miscellaneous</i>	3	20.0%

Table 18. *In What Ways do You and Other Members of the Constituency Staff Use E-mail as Part of Your Work? (n=12)*

<i>With the House of Commons office</i>	12	100%
<i>With constituents</i>	10	83.3%
<i>With public servants</i>	9	75%
<i>With the member</i>	7	75%
<i>Other ways/miscellaneous</i>	3	25%

Clearly, the single-greatest use of e-mail is for inter-office communication, either between constituency and Ottawa offices or with other members' offices. And, while e-mail communication with constituents and public servants is high, it is not universal. Constituency offices report greater e-mail communication with public servants, although the sample sizes are too small to make this a conclusive finding.

One point to note is that some constituency offices are located in communities without high-speed Internet access and thus must depend on dial-up services. This was not tracked in our surveys but may affect the degree of use by staff. Staff use and attitudes towards ICTs are explored further in the following sections.

Volume

Of concern for at least some members and their staff is the increased volume of communications due to ICTs. Faxes and especially e-mail allow messages to be sent quickly, cheaply and, of particular concern, to multiple destinations. This allows organizations and communities of interest to "blanket" members' offices with messages, and, while some members welcome this increased communication, others find it frustrating. As we will see, the volume of e-mail messages in particular may affect the extent to which members and staff use e-mail, particularly to communicate with public servants.

How many e-mails do MPs' offices receive in a day? There is a striking difference between House of Commons and constituency offices here (tables 19 and 20). Both offices were asked *On average, how many e-mails does [the] office as a whole receive a day?* Despite our small survey sample, the differences are remarkable.

Table 19. *On Average, How Many E-mails Does Your House of Commons Office Receive Daily? (n=15)*

<i>1-50</i>	5	33.3%
<i>51-100</i>	7	46.7%
<i>101-150</i>	2	13.3%
<i>151-200</i>	1	6.7%

Table 20. *On Average, How Many E-mails Does Your Constituency Office Receive Daily?*
(n=12)

1–10	4	33.3%
11–20	7	58.3%
21–30	1	8.3%

House of Commons offices receive an average of over fifty e-mails a day, while only one constituency office receives more than twenty. This is presumably because the Ottawa offices receive most policy messages – either from constituents or communities of interest – and, as we will see in the next chapter, most constituent requests for assistance are made by phone or in person. We will return to this issue later.

MPs’ Perceptions

There is no doubt that ICTs have led to more messages and contacts. Members were asked *As a result of ICTs, are you witnessing greater communication to your offices by communities of interest?*, and twenty-six of twenty-eight respondents said yes; one replied in the negative and another – newly elected – was unsure. When asked *If so, has this significantly increased the workload in your office?*, twenty-two of the twenty-six respondents said yes. One said no, another “yes and no,” and two were unsure.

Is this increased volume a good thing? Members had more mixed opinions when asked *If there has been an increase, is this a positive development?*. Many members said they had mixed feelings and could not clearly come down on one side or the other. But of the twenty-one of twenty-six members who took a position, ten felt it was generally positive. Some of their comments included “[It] allows citizens greater access – that’s positive!” and that the “people can apprise you better about the issues and you can respond faster.” One member said “I believe it’s my job to hear people out and to respond, defend [and] explain,” and another simply said “Bring it on!”

Two MPs felt that increased communication was a negative development, primarily because of the difficulty of handling messages – one said the problem was “sorting out and classifying incoming communication,” and another complained that it “pulls staff off other jobs.” The remaining respondents all said there were clear positive and negative aspects and were not sure which outweighed the other. One MP said “It’s useful to get quick info on opinions, but a challenge to handle it all,” and another wished “there was some way you could screen out the trivial.”

The negative feelings about e-mail stem particularly from the difficulty of ascertaining its origins. Several members said they only responded to e-mails that were clearly from their constituency, and at least one office has a policy of writing back to e-mail correspondents and asking for a mailing address or postal code to confirm they are constituents. Another member said that he had “a real

system going” in his office to handle e-mail but that it was still hard to identify constituency or provincial origins of messages. However, he did take note of e-mails from “accredited” high-profile national groups.

Members were asked by what means of communication (e-mail, telephone, in-person, regular mail, fax) they were most frequently in contact with communities of interest, and which means were *most effective* in their view. However, many felt they could not offer a formal ranking, since communication differed according to the type of group, between initial and subsequent contact, and whether the member supported their views or not.

Some MPs stressed that they preferred receiving initial contact by regular mail, while e-mail was useful for subsequent contacts. One MP said “After the relationship is established, it tends to drift to e-mail.” However, other members said there was very little difference between different forms of communication – the more important factor was the group’s message and their arguments or points. In short, views on this issue were inconclusive.

To summarize, ICTs have increased the volume of communications with MPs’ offices and, in particular, e-mails to House of Commons offices. Some members welcome this, but many have concerns about organizing this increased level of communication.

Use of Government Web Sites

This section takes an early look at how one particular ICT affects members’ ombudsman roles. Members and their staff use department and agency web sites, although not in overwhelming numbers. Members and their House of Commons staff were asked whether they visited government web sites and for what reasons; constituency staff were asked what percentage of constituent requests required web site visits.

First, let’s look at web site use by members and Commons staff (tables 21 and 22).

Table 21. *Members of Parliament:
Do You Visit Department and Agency
Web Sites? (n=28)*

<i>Yes</i>	16	57.1%
<i>No</i>	12	42.9%

Table 22. *House of Commons Staff:
Do You Ever Visit Government Depart-
ment and Agency Web Sites? (n=15)*

<i>Yes</i>	9	60%
<i>No</i>	6	40%

Government web sites were cited as useful for two general reasons: information on government programs and policies; and to find specific individuals and their contact details. Members sought information on programs and policies either as part of their own research or to pass it on to constituents. Government members particularly noted their ability to access the latest news releases and speeches as one method of informing themselves on government policies outside their specific areas of interest – or, as one Liberal MP put it, “to get the latest policy position [and] spin.”

Staff visited web sites for similar reasons, and it is perhaps surprising that not all Commons staff reported visiting web sites. One staffer said they visited sites “continuously – for information on programs and policies.” Others agreed that sites provided useful information for policies/programs – for “basic research,” “information gathering,” and “background information,” as well as names and contacts “for phone numbers,” “to search for documents or contact names.”

Web Sites and Constituency Work

As mentioned, web sites appear to be increasingly useful for constituency work, although our survey did not find a particularly high reliance on web sites by constituency staff, as the question in Table 23 to constituency staff shows. None of the constituency staff added comments in response to this specific question. However, when asked *Are there ways in which the Internet and other information and communication technology have made your job easier in recent years?*, ten of the twelve respondents specifically cited web sites as an important factor in their work. This suggests that even if web sites are only relevant for a quarter or fewer of constituent requests, they play an essential role.

Table 23. *What Percentage of Constituent Requests Require You to Visit Department and Agency Web Sites in Search of Information or Contact Details? (n=12)*

<i>Percentage of requests</i>	<i>Responses</i>	<i>Percentage of valid responses</i>
<i>1 to 25</i>	8	66.7
<i>26 to 50</i>	2	16.7
<i>51 to 75</i>	1	8.3
<i>76 to 100</i>	1	8.3

Here are some of their comments:

- “Government info through website is wonderful. Ability to pass on websites to constituents – great.”
- “Yes [ICTs have made the job easier]. Most government publications are on line.”

- “The information is readily available. I do not have to wait for callbacks.”
- “Yes. I can get info easier and faster.” [This could refer to e-mail and/or web sites.]
- “Yes. It is much easier to get forms and the guidelines for programmes both for this office and constituents.”
- “[We can rely on] downloadable applications versus stocking a ton of stuff.”
- “Contact information is helpful.”
- “[The] Internet is an excellent tool. Many requests to our office are found on Internet.”
- “Tools ensure that we can work more effectively in the search for documents.”
- “Internet means that we can search [for information] more rapidly, without waiting.”

Interestingly, there is some evidence that government web sites are *reducing* the ombudsman role of MPs’ offices, since members and their staff can direct constituents directly to relevant sites rather than collecting and presenting information themselves. One MP said “we try not to spoonfeed constituents – if it’s simple, we just refer them to the web site,” while a staff member said “with more and more people online, it becomes easier for people to help themselves.”

However, other evidence suggests a continued and even increased role for MP’s offices, particularly in assisting constituents who are not web-savvy. One MP said an important function was to “download information for constituents without computers,” and another said web site visits were part of “doing stuff for seniors – to forward to constituents.” More generally, staff and members use government sites as part of their own initiatives for their constituencies. One MP said that staff was “continually poking around for information for the constituency,” and another said government sites were useful “for program information and for grant information.”

Links from Members’ Web Sites

Some members have created direct links to government web pages on their own web sites. This study does not specifically report on members’ web sites because it is difficult to establish accurate data on them. Most member’s web sites are operated and maintained through their party caucus, but some MPs have created their own web sites using other providers, so that it is difficult to establish conclusively how many MPs have web sites and how extensive they are.

Furthermore, while most members appeared to have some sort of personalized web site at the time of this study, these sites varied enormously in scope and regularity of upgrading. Some are quite

comprehensive but often out of date, possibly because the staff creating them have moved on from the office. Other studies have found similar trends.

However, what is of interest here is that at least some MPs' sites offer direct links to government web sites. These links also vary a great deal – some members simply offer a link to a list of department and agency web pages, while others have lengthy lists of issues and “frequently asked questions” about government services. However, it is difficult to establish how often these links are used by constituents, and in our surveys very few respondents mentioned these links as examples of how technology is allowing constituents to receive information through MPs' web sites without actually contacting members or staff. We will pick up on this issue of direct technological links again in Chapter 5.

Privacy Concerns

A final important area regarding use of technology is attitudes and concerns about privacy. Members and staff were asked for their views about on-line privacy and whether this affected their use of the Internet.

First, members were asked how concerned they were about their personal on-line privacy (Table 24).

Table 24. *In General, How Concerned are You about Your Own Privacy and Security on the Internet? (n=28)*

<i>Extremely concerned</i>	5	17.9%
<i>Concerned</i>	7	25.0%
<i>Aware but not particularly concerned</i>	7	25.0%
<i>Not concerned at all</i>	1	3.6%
<i>Other/No response</i>	8	28.6%

Clearly, members have mixed views and levels of concern. A typical comment added by one MP was that they “don't have total trust.” But another MP said “other people are taking care of that issue.”

Staff in both offices were asked more directly about their privacy concerns and how this affected their use of e-mail in particular. Identical questions were posed to each office; tables 25 to 27 report the views of constituency offices:

Table 25. *Constituency Offices: How Concerned are You about the Security of E-mail Messages? (n=12)*

<i>A lot</i>	1	8.3%
<i>Somewhat</i>	4	33.3%
<i>A little</i>	5	41.7%
<i>Hardly at all</i>	2	16.7%

Table 26. *Constituency Offices: If You are Concerned, to What Extent does this Affect Your Use of E-mail as Part of Your Job? (n=12)*

<i>A lot</i>	1	8.3%
<i>Somewhat</i>	2	16.7%
<i>A little</i>	5	41.7%
<i>Hardly at all</i>	3	25.0%
<i>No response</i>	1	8.3%

Table 27. *Constituency Offices: Would You Use E-mail More if you Could be Assured it Was Completely Reliable and Private? (n=12)*

<i>Yes</i>	4	33.3%
<i>No</i>	4	33.3%
<i>Would use the same amount</i>	2	16.7%
<i>Don't know</i>	1	8.3%
<i>No response</i>	1	8.3%

It appears constituency staff have some concerns about privacy and security, but the effect on their use of e-mail is moderate at best. Tables 28 to 30 reflect the views of House of Commons staff.

Table 28. *House of Commons Offices: How Concerned are You about the Security of E-mail Messages? (n=15)*

<i>A lot</i>	3	20.0%
<i>Somewhat</i>	3	20.0%
<i>A little</i>	4	26.7%
<i>Hardly at all</i>	5	33.3%

Table 29. *House of Commons Offices: If You are Concerned, to What Extent Does this Affect Your Use of E-mail as Part of Your Job? (n=15)*

<i>A lot</i>	2	13.3%
<i>Somewhat</i>	2	13.3%
<i>A little</i>	3	20.0%
<i>Hardly at all</i>	5	33.3%
<i>No response</i>	3	20.0%

Table 30. *House of Commons Offices: Would You Use E-mail More if You Could be Assured it Was Completely Reliable and Private? (n=15)*

<i>Yes</i>	3	20.0%
<i>No</i>	6	40.0%
<i>Would use the same amount</i>	2	13.3%
<i>No response</i>	0	6.7%

It appears that Ottawa staff are slightly more concerned about security, but, again, the effect on their use of e-mail is moderate at best.

Overall, both the members and staff in our samples appear somewhat concerned about on-line privacy, but this does not appear to affect significantly their use of e-mail. We will return to this tentative finding (based on the small samples) when we discuss the relatively low level of e-mail correspondence between members' offices and public servants.

Conclusion

We have seen that members and their staff use ICTs to varying extents. Some members appear to choose deliberately not to use ICTs, while staff rely heavily on e-mail for inter-office correspondence and web sites for other information. Respondents have some concerns about the volume of messages precipitated by ICTs, as well as their privacy and security, but these concerns are not overwhelming. Now that we have a firm understanding of how ICTs are used by MPs and their staff, we can turn to their relations with public servants and the role of technology there.

CHAPTER 4

INTERACTION WITH PUBLIC SERVANTS

In this chapter, we discuss the extent to which members and their staff interact with public servants, the reasons for interaction, and the key question of *how* they interact. As we will see, staff generally interact with public servants more than with members themselves, and most interaction takes place by telephone or fax rather than by e-mail. And, while members and staff have various suggestions on how technology can enhance their relations with public servants, many argue that other variables and issues must be overcome to realize the potential of ICTs.

MPs' Interaction with Public Servants

How often do MPs themselves interact with public servants? Table 31 shows considerable differences within our sample.

Table 31. *How Often do You Personally Interact with Public Servants (n=28)?*

<i>Almost never</i>	4	14.3%
<i>Occasionally (a few times a month)</i>	9	32.1%
<i>Frequently (a few times a week)</i>	7	25.0%
<i>Daily</i>	4	14.3%
<i>Several times daily</i>	2	7.1%
<i>Don't know/Couldn't say</i>	2	7.1%

Factors Influencing Level of Contact

While our sample is too small to draw definite conclusions, there are some patterns that may tell us what factors influence the level of contact. One likely variable is *region*. The eight MPs from the four western provinces all reported they interacted directly with public servants almost never or only occasionally (less than a few times a month). In contrast, five of the six MPs from the Atlantic provinces reported interaction at least several times a week or daily.

Ontario and Quebec MPs were in the middle – four reported little or only occasional contact, while seven reported frequent contact (several times a week). None reported daily contact. Thus, as we move east (and recognizing the small survey sample), MPs are more likely to be in regular contact with public servants.

Similarly, MPs from *urban and semi-rural* ridings were likely to report less contact. Of the nineteen MPs from urban and semi-rural ridings, twelve reported contact of only a few times a month or less,

with another six reporting contact a few times a week. In contrast, only two of six MPs from rural ridings reported less than daily contact.

We can also see some *party* differences, although they obviously overlap with regional patterns. Of the thirteen Liberal MPs interviewed, two reported no or only occasional contact, seven reported frequent contact, and four reported contact daily or more. In contrast, all six Alliance MPs interviewed reported no or only occasional contact. These patterns may of course be influenced by the Liberals being the governing party and thus possibly having more interaction with public servants.

Finally, *age* may be a factor. The four MPs under age thirty-five all reported occasional (a few times a month) contact. The three MPs over fifty-six all reported daily contact.

In short, and recognizing the small survey sample, the evidence suggests that the MPs most often in contact with public servants are older, often from Atlantic Canada and/or represent rural ridings. Members from urban and semi-rural ridings and from western Canada appear less likely to be in regular contact with public servants.

Time Spent in Contact

A related question asked members what percentage of their working time was spent in contact with public servants (Table 32).

Table 32. *What Percentage of Your Own Time is Spent in Contact with Public Servants?*

<i>Percentage of time</i>	<i>Responses (n=28)</i>	<i>Percentage of valid responses (n=23)</i>
<i>1 to 5</i>	11	47.8
<i>6 to 10</i>	7	30.4
<i>11 to 15</i>	2	8.7
<i>16 to 20</i>	0	0
<i>21 to 25</i>	1	4.3
<i>26 to 30</i>	1	4.3
<i>31 to 35</i>	1	4.3
<i>No response</i>	5	—

Obviously most MPs spend relatively little time in direct interaction with public servants. Slightly different regional patterns emerged here. Again, MPs from Western Canada reported the least contact with public servants – all seven western MPs reported spending 5% or less of their time with public servants. In contrast, no Quebec MP reported contact that low (less than 6%), and the three MPs reporting contact of more than 15% were all members from Quebec. However, MPs from Atlantic

Canada were not more likely to report greater time spent in contact – both they and Ontario MPs were about equally distributed between 1% and 15% contact. Thus, western MPs again seem to spend less time with public servants, while Quebec MPs spend the most time.

Reasons for Contact

We now have some idea of how much MPs interact with public servants. But exactly *why* do MPs interact with public servants? And how is this different from staff interaction with public servants? There are two major reasons why MPs interact with public servants. The first is what we will call *policy* interaction – that is, discussions (usually in Ottawa) on broad issues of government policy. These interactions commonly stem from MPs’ committee and critic roles.

The second type of contact is *constituency* interaction. This means issues and concerns related directly to the members’ constituencies, particularly the resolution of individual constituent cases and complaints. (Constituency interactions may include policy discussions; the distinction is that the policy is of direct and particular interest to the MP’s specific riding or even a specific constituent.)

To begin with some context, it is interesting to note David Docherty’s finding that MPs in both the 34th (1988–93) and 35th Parliaments (1993–97) reported spending 42% of their overall working time on “constituency affairs,” which included direct contact with constituents, attending local events, and other activities unrelated to individual casework.¹⁶

Our survey took a different approach and asked MPs to estimate *what proportion* of their time in contact with public servants (as reported in Table 32) was *related to individual constituent cases*. Given a choice of fixed categories, MPs gave quite varied responses (Table 33).

Table 33. *What Proportion of that Contact [with Public Servants] is in Relation to Individual Constituent Cases? (n=28)*

<i>Proportion of time</i>	<i>Responses (n=28)</i>	<i>Percentage of valid responses (n =21)</i>
<i>1 to 25</i>	8	38.1
<i>26 to 50</i>	4	19.0
<i>51 to 75</i>	3	14.3
<i>76 to 100</i>	6	28.6
<i>No answer/Unsure</i>	7	–

There are slight regional patterns within this small sample, as all of the six MPs who said their contact was at least 75% concerned with constituent cases were from Quebec and Atlantic Canada. On the other hand, the type of riding appeared to have almost no influence.

When asked in an open-ended question for what reasons they personally interacted with public servants (*For what reasons do you personally interact with public servants?*), MPs commonly identified both policy and constituency reasons. But their answers give us further clues to explain these interactions and suggest some clear distinctions between the two types of interaction.

When it came to *policy* interaction, MPs were most likely to mention information briefings from public servants – either specifically to the individual MP, if the member requested a briefing, or more routine briefings to larger groups such as standing committees. They were less likely to mention more proactive discussions in which the MP was “putting forward positions” (as one MP said) or otherwise advocating particular policies and ideas.

In other words, *policy* interaction appeared largely to involve the transmission of information from public servants to MPs, rather than the other way around. In particular, few MPs reported meeting directly with public servants to advocate and argue for general, national policies affecting the nation as a whole – as opposed to *constituency*-related policies, which fall into the second category.

In contrast, many MPs reported much more proactive and involved *constituency* interaction. Most members said they initiated contact with public servants when the MP’s staff had difficulty resolving a constituency matter – as one MP put it, they became involved when there was “a logjam, something not going through, staff getting the runaround,” and another said “staff handle the cut and dried; I [deal with] the heavier, more touchy items.” Other members used similar language – one said “if dealing with a difficult case ... I [rather than the staff] would go directly to the public servants,” and another said they contacted public servants “to get to the heart of the matter.” Some MPs said they became particularly involved when they knew the specific public servant handling a file.

We should not overestimate these differences, but they do appear clear. When MPs interact with public servants in Ottawa on national issues, it appears to be primarily for information briefings rather than for more significant exchanges. When MPs interact with public servants, particularly at the local level, over constituency issues, evidence suggests the discussions are more likely to involve persuasion and demands by the member.

With What Level of Public Servants Do MPs Interact?

To further understand interaction between MPs and public servants and to speculate on differences between *policy* and *constituency* interactions, it is useful to ask with what level of public servant members report the most interaction (Table 34).

Table 34. *Rank in Order the Level of Public Servant with Whom You Are Most Often in Contact (n=28)*

	<i>Deputy minister</i>	<i>Assistant deputy minister</i>	<i>Directors general/director</i>	<i>Manager</i>	<i>Below mgmt.</i>
<i>First</i>	2	5	11	6	2
<i>Second</i>	3	4	5	3	4
<i>Third</i>	2	4	5	2	1
<i>Fourth</i>	4	3		4	
<i>Fifth</i>	3				4
<i>Never</i>	2	3		1	1
<i>N/A/Did not know*</i>	12	9	7	12	16

*MP reported no contact with this level of public servant or were otherwise unable to provide a ranking.

It is difficult to draw conclusive trends here, particularly with such a small sample, but it does appear that MPs report more contact with mid-level public servants rather than with those at the very top of or below management. This can be seen particularly in the number of MPs who ranked contact with directors and directors-general first and the relatively low number that reported no contact or were unsure about their contact with this level of public servant.

Strikingly, no MP from western Canada and only two Ontario MPs reported or ranked any contact with public servants who are below management level. In contrast, two Quebec MPs ranked this level (below management) first, and two others ranked it second and third, and four of seven MPs from Atlantic Canada also reported contact, although none ranked it first. Furthermore, MPs who reported contact with public servants below management levels tended to be from semi-rural or rural ridings (eight of twelve who reported contact were from these ridings).

MPs had additional comments on this question. In regard to deputy and assistant/associate deputy ministers, one MP said “we rarely see deputy ministers and ADMs,” and another said “they change so much I’m not sure who they are.” At least two MPs said they rarely had contact with these individuals themselves but did interact with their assistants more regularly. A third said that they went to people at this level “for more authority in a complicated matter” but that managers and people below management were “the people who really do the work.” One MP said “I start right at the bottom ... when I want to get something done, I go straight to the bottom.” This MP suggested lower-level public servants appreciated such attention: “Take them out for lunch, they’re thrilled.”

In short, members report contact with varying levels of public servants, but it does appear that the categories of MPs who report relatively little contact with public servants appear to be in contact with higher-level public servants. Members from categories that report more contact also appear more likely to interact with lower-level public servants.

Methods of Contact between Members and Public Servants

We know how much and why MPs interact with public servants, but the question of particular interest for our study is *how* this contact takes place. To what degree do MPs use new technologies in their dealings with public servants?

We asked members to rank five types of communication media by how often they used them in their contact with public servants. We then asked them to rank the five by their relative level of *effectiveness* (Table 35).

Table 35. *Rank in Order of Frequency the Ways in Which You Are in Contact with Public Servants (n=28)*

	<i>Telephone</i>	<i>In person</i>	<i>Mail</i>	<i>E-mail</i>	<i>Fax</i>
<i>First</i>	20 (71.4%)	6 (21.4%)	2 (7.1%)	0	0
<i>Second</i>	5 (17.9%)	14 (50.0%)	3 (10.7%)	5 (17.9%)	1 (3.6%)
<i>Third</i>	2	5	8 (28.6%)	6 (21.4%)	2
<i>Fourth</i>	1	1	8 (28.6%)	6 (21.4%)	3
<i>Fifth</i>	0	0	0	3	2
<i>N/A</i>	0	2	7	8	20

Note: Many MPs said they did not personally use some of these five media in dealing with public servants, leading to the large number of non-responses for mail, e-mail and, particularly, faxes.

Clearly, MPs primarily rely on the telephone or personal meetings with public servants and are slightly more likely to use regular mail over e-mail as alternatives. This may not be too surprising when we recall from the previous chapter that some MPs choose not to use e-mail at all. One member who does not use e-mail added a comment to this question: “I don’t like the idea of technology in communication ... it’s too cold and impersonal. We’re losing the ability to look each other in the eye.” Still, it seems that even MPs more comfortable with ICTs are not making much use of new information and communication technologies in their dealings with public servants.

Why is this? A likely explanation stems out of the reasons *why* MPs interact directly with public servants, particularly on constituency matters. Because members tend to intervene in difficult situations to break “logjams” and “to get to the heart of the matter,” they wish to use the most direct, immediate and personal ways possible of contacting public servants. Thus they phone individuals or their offices rather than send e-mails that may not be opened immediately, or they arrange personal meetings rather than correspond in writing by either traditional or electronic means.

MPs’ preference for the telephone and personal meetings is also seen when they were asked to rank the same five media by how *effective* they were when dealing with public servants.

The number of non-responses was particularly high for this question, because many MPs said they could not answer the question since it depended enormously on the nature of the issue and the interactions. As one member explained, “The initial contact is by phone. Further information is by e-mail. Faxes are used for complex documents and writing [as] regular mail takes too long. However, mail can be hand-delivered within [the member’s home city.]” Another said that it “depends on the magnitude of what you’re discussing. Phone and e-mail are precursors to face-to-face meetings.” And a third said “for basic information or a yes/no – phone. For detailed opinion – mail. For quick discussions with a written record – e-mail.” Still, for those who did respond and rank one or more media, the trends are interesting (Table 36).

Table 36. *Rank in Order What Ways are Most Effective in Your View When You are in Contact with Public Servants (n=28)*

	<i>Telephone</i>	<i>In person</i>	<i>Mail</i>	<i>E-mail</i>	<i>Fax</i>
<i>First</i>	6	13	2	0	0
<i>Second</i>	10	4	5	0	0
<i>Third</i>	0	0	2	5	1
<i>Fourth</i>	0	0	1	3	2
<i>Fifth</i>	0	0	0	2	1
<i>N/A</i>	12	11	18	18	24

Keeping in mind the very high level of non-responses, it does seem that MPs strongly prefer directly speaking to public servants rather than using e-mail. To understand this further, it is worth looking at some of their unsolicited comments in response to this question.

Many members emphasized their preference for personal interactions that contributed to building relationships with public servants. One said they preferred the telephone as “there are things you can do to build a relationship,” and another said “it’s all about building relationships.” A member said “when getting a letter, I try to phone [back] ... even to faxes,” and another said “in person [is best] for two reasons – [first,] establishing relationships is extremely important. Once they get to know you, it doesn’t matter ... [second,] try not to go over their heads ... try to work with them. Then they’ll do what they can for you.” A fifth MP felt that “a phone puts them at ease – an e-mail would be pretty abrupt.” (On the other hand, another MP preferred in-person meetings with public servants so that the MP could “grab them by the tie and make them listen.”)

However, some MPs did suggest that once a relationship has been established, a wider range of media could be used. Responding to the earlier question (see Table 35), one member said “e-mail [isn’t] used unless you have a personal relationship.” Another member said “e-mail just hasn’t become part of the routine – if there were better links made, or the creation of a community of issues, it would make more sense. However, you just pick up the phone if you’re desperate.” A third said

“e-mail would be great, but there’s this sacred cow – this sense that we’re not supposed to be doing it [i.e., informally interacting with public servants].” (We will pick up on this "sacred cow" in the following section.)

How Can Things Be Improved? Views of MPs

Members were asked *What new practices should be developed within the public service to help accommodate requests for help from MPs?* and had varied responses to this open-ended question. However, very few seemed to identify *technological practices and solutions* unless prompted, even though they had just completed several questions on the media they used when interacting with public servants. When they were prompted to consider technological issues, they tended to downplay them compared to other issues and factors. Thus we will look first at these other issues before discussing technological solutions.

Non-Technological Solutions

As we have already seen, many MPs identified building personal relationships as an important aspect to better relations between members and public servants. One MP said the relationship “needs to be more one-on-one. MPs [should] get together with public servants to get to know each other – [perhaps with several MPs in] multi-party lunches,” and another suggested it would be good to have more receptions and similar events where MPs and public servants could cross paths.

Another member said a personal relationship meant “it’s more than a voice on the phone,” while a fourth said “unless you develop a relationship, most departments go into a panic when they find out you’re a member.” A fifth MP emphasized that relationships with public servants had improved over time because “we know the people there now.” And a sixth said it would be useful for MPs and their staff to visit public servants’ offices to see where and how they worked.

Members had mixed opinions on the question of whether public servants were as willing and able to assist them as possible. Many MPs suggested that public servants were not as forthcoming and helpful as they either could be or perhaps wanted to be, primarily because of control by ministers’ offices or other superiors. This might be due either to partisanship – a reluctance at the ministerial level to help opposition MPs as much as government MPs – or a general desire by ministers to keep legislators and public servants separate, regardless of the member’s party.

A Progressive Conservative MP said “politics plays an important role ... some people hesitate before responding to an opposition member.” But other opposition MPs indicated they did not feel that partisanship affected the ways in which they dealt with public servants. In this respect they joined government backbenchers in suggesting the second explanation.

Certainly a number of members (and staff) felt the most important factor affecting their relations with public servants is the general attitude that such contact is inappropriate. According to this argument, legislators should only interact with the office of the responsible minister; by interacting

directly with public servants, lines of accountability and responsibility are blurred. Hence, the member quoted earlier who said “there’s this sacred cow – this sense that we’re not supposed to be doing it” reported that she and her staff very rarely initiated contact with public servants. Instead, all correspondence and concerns were sent to ministers’ offices.

Other members also complained that public servants, particularly in the National Capital Region, were unwilling to interact directly with them, often despite the public servant's own preference. A Liberal MP (previously quoted above) said “most departments go into a panic when they find out you're a member. ... In Ottawa, they want you to go through the minister’s office,” whereas public servants in his constituency were more forthcoming. Another government member said that in their riding “people are pretty cooperative and respond quickly. In Ottawa [it’s] hard work because of tremendous blocking. ... Politicians are there to be handled.” A third Liberal said that some public servants were “frightened” of talking to MPs and that this varied according to the department and its individual culture, while another said that ministers’ offices strongly discouraged direct contact with public servants so that “we’re cut off from the source.” A New Democrat also said public servants’ reluctance was towards MPs as a whole rather than just to opposition members: “[when an MP contacts a public servant] immediately red flags go up unless you’ve got a pretty secure employee.”

But not all MPs felt public servants were unhelpful or reluctant. An Alliance MP said of public servants generally that “they’re pretty good,” while a government backbencher said “if it’s a barrier, it’s a perceived barrier” rather than a real one. This MP went on to say “a lot of MPs say that the public service is not approachable. That’s not my experience. I find them helpful” and suggested building relationships was key to this.

Another Liberal said that new members in particular might have unreasonable expectations as to what public servants can do for them and that the “most important thing is that the MP should be educated early on [about] what they can and cannot do ... [there’s] no sense banging your head against the wall.” Another opposition MP said that “lots of MPs don’t realize the resources at their fingertips. ... There isn’t a proper mechanism [and there] needs to be a better outreach style ... better ways to get in contact.” This MP said “this would particularly benefit opposition MPs.”

Technology Solutions

But what about technology? As noted, most MPs did not immediately identify technological solutions as important for improving the relationship between members and public servants. When prompted, they gave mixed opinions.

Some MPs argued that ICTs and similar technologies were more likely to be a problem than a solution. One said there needed to be “less technology; more handshakes.” Another said “we’re trying to do everything by technology ... and we’re losing the humanness of dealing with people. ... I don’t think we need more technologies – people matter.” However, both these MPs reported low personal use of technology (neither used e-mail personally) and expressed strong reservations about technology throughout the interview.

Other MPs did indicate they felt technology had already made important contributions. One MP said that both government and personal “web sites are a tremendous source of information” (recall the previous chapter’s discussion), and another said “technology barriers are not that important. E-mail has been a big benefit.”

Several MPs identified the lack of easily available e-mail addresses for public servants as a problem, since although phone numbers are easily available in the government electronic telephone book, e-mail addresses are not routinely listed on-line. Several MPs, and their staff in the separate surveys, said this made it more difficult to contact individuals other than by phone or regular mail. One MP wanted “more information on staff ... to know who to call – particularly e-mail addresses.” But beyond this area, MPs had few suggestions about how technology might change or transform their relationship with public servants.

At least some MPs still felt that technology was less important than larger attitude changes. It’s “nothing to do with technology,” said one MP, but [rather it has to do with] the lack of “openness on the part of government to deal with MPs. If that barrier was broken down, use of IT would be worthwhile.” Another said the value of ICT solutions depended partly on the individual MP’s comfort with technology, but also that you “need the personal contact first” with public servants before ICTs were fully useful. And another MP said the “key problem is attitudinal – [and can] not be changed through practices and procedures.”

Learning Imperatives

To further prompt members on technology issues, they were asked *Are there learning imperatives being imposed by ICTs? If so, do you think these have affected use of ICTs by MPs and public servants?* Some members were unclear about the meaning of the question, which focused on whether they felt compelled to keep up with the latest technologies to do their jobs. But nineteen of twenty-eight MPs agreed there were learning imperatives, while five disagreed and four were unsure.

Some MPs were clear that technology was central to their work: “I can’t imagine not having e-mail,” said one Member, while another said “computers are used by everyone now.” Some MPs who had concerns about technology commented that they felt pressured to keep up with technology. One member who does not use e-mail and rarely uses his cell phone still said “we learn to use the tools we have” even if they have concerns about them. But others felt the imperatives were not great; one respondent said “every MP handles this issue differently. I don’t think there’s a huge compulsion to keep up with the technology.” Several members observed that they did not necessarily have to be up to date on technology, as long as their staff were fully trained and capable. Furthermore, a number of MPs observed that they simply did not have time to take advantage of the training and assistance provided by parliamentary IT staff.

However, members were less clear on how these affected the use of ICTs by members and public servants in their relationship to each other. One MP observed that “e-mail intensifies the

expectations of constituents for immediate answers, and this affects both MPs and public servants.” But some members felt that little progress was being made. One MP said “I see this as an unexplored area and a way in which public servants could be a little more proactive,” and another said that while “departments have used technology to their advantage to disseminate information,” efforts to engage members in back-and-forth communication were more limited: “there’s an attempt on the surface, but not really there.” (The problem of unlisted e-mail addresses was given as an example.)

However, in general, there were few clear trends on whether the learning imperatives of ICTs affected relations between members and public servants. As suggested, in some cases members felt that departments were not taking the necessary initiatives to ensure ICTs could enhance relations between parliamentarians and public servants. But, in other ways, members appear pleased with department ICT initiatives, as we see in the next section.

Department and Agency Reporting

Members receive a steady stream of annual reports and other documents from government departments and agencies, and many observed that they cannot review more than a fraction of them. As one MP put it, “we get stacks and stacks of reports,” and another said “receiving it is not a problem ... it’s picking out what is useful.” When asked *How can ICTs be used to enhance reporting by government departments and agencies to Parliament?*, members had a number of ideas and observations on how technology might enhance the reporting relationship.

Some members said they would appreciate e-mailed summaries of reports. “Synopses on e-mail would speed things up,” said one member. “We get so many reports [but] summaries and recommendations are more useful. Again, perhaps e-mail would be a great way of doing this.”

At least some members indicated that they were pleased with the increasing number of electronic versions of reports. One MP said the use of ICTs was “already happening. A lot of the stuff is on web sites and more accessible and public.” A number of members said they liked reports on CD-ROM or other electronic versions, which they could “cut, paste [and] browse.” One member said “when things are not available in electronic format, it’s really a problem,” and another said that electronic versions were “fabulous for circulating information.” An MP appreciated “lasting reports that are accessible in a library function,” and another said that “info on web sites increases opportunities ... [and was] particularly good for [the] opposition” because members could quickly access information.

Are members satisfied with the current level of electronic reports? One member complained that “some reports are made so that you can’t print them – you need an access code. There is a mentality overly concerned with security instead of the desire to disseminate what you know.” Another MP said they were “not sure whether [ICTs] would help. There’s a certain amount of secrecy and fear – if you let information out you’re in trouble.” But others said that information was generally accessible – “it’s up to the MPs to know they can access the information,” said one Alliance member.

Apart from formal reports, do members feel ICTs have a role in improving reporting relationships? Again, some MPs felt the issue was government attitudes towards disclosure rather than the level of ICT use. “The technology is in place. Technology isn’t the problem,” said one member. But, generally, most members felt that technology could help improve reporting relationships or already had done so – for example, through the increased use of e-mailed briefings and updates.

Conclusions on MP–Public Servant Interaction

To sum up, it is clear that while most MPs interact with public servants to some extent, this appears to vary somewhat according to regional and riding factors. In particular, based on our small sample, members from western Canada and urban ridings seem less likely than others to have much interaction with public servants. These members report interaction with public servants to be as little as a few times a month or less, while MPs from more rural ridings and Atlantic Canada often report daily interaction. Members seem to be most in contact with public servants at the director general/director level, although this varies without clear trends.

Members primarily use and seem to prefer interaction either in person or by telephone. Other media such as e-mail and faxes are seen as suitable for the transmission of written information and documents. But members appear to only be interested in using ICTs to communicate with public servants whom they know well rather than for first contact. Members rely on personal meetings or the telephone to first establish relationships with public servants, which can then be supplemented with e-mail or other communication media.

The importance of personal relationships before technological solutions was also clear when MPs were asked how their relationships with public servants could be improved. Not surprisingly, members felt that building better personal connections and contacts between MPs and public servants, rather than improved use of technologies, was the key to better relationships. The one area of contention was the listing of public servants’ e-mail addresses. Additionally, many members argued that control by ministers’ offices was a significant barrier that discouraged public servants from being too forthcoming or helpful for MPs, although members disagreed whether partisanship was a factor here, since several government backbenchers made similar complaints.

Information and communication technologies have certainly created learning imperatives for members, but at least some MPs feel this has not been reciprocated by government departments. Still, in the area of department and agency reporting, MPs appear to appreciate the increasing trend towards electronic versions of reports and wish this to continue.

Staff Interaction

We now discuss interaction between MPs’ staff and public servants. Relationships are much more established at this level and particularly in constituencies, where the main job of staff is normally interaction with public servants on behalf of constituents. In fact, as suggested above, staff may be a

crucial variable affecting relations among MPs and public servants and the role of technology. This is for two reasons: first, legislative staff tend to interact with public servants more than with MPs themselves; and, secondly, staff are generally more conversant and familiar with current ICTs. Thus in this section we try to track some of these trends and assess the use of technology. Table 37 shows the frequency of staff interaction with public servants.

Table 37. *How Often Does Your Staff Interact with Public Servants? (n=28)*

<i>Almost never</i>	2	7.1%
<i>Occasionally (a few times a month)</i>	1	3.6%
<i>Frequently (a few times a week)</i>	3	10.7%
<i>Daily</i>	10	35.7%
<i>Several times daily</i>	9	32.1%
<i>Don't know/Couldn't say</i>	3	10.7%

The figures in the table are not particularly surprising – for constituency staff, interaction with public servants on behalf of constituents is usually their chief responsibility. House of Commons staff may have slightly less contact – as one MP put it, “Commons staff – every day. Constituency staff – hourly.” In fact, the only curious trend here is the MPs reporting that their staff almost never interacted with public servants, suggesting either a highly unusual situation or a misunderstanding of the question.

House of Commons Staff

House of Commons staff were asked to what extent they interacted with public servants, expressed as a percentage of overall office time for all staff (Table 38).

Table 38. *Thinking of All the Staff in the House of Commons Office, What Percentage of Office Time is Spent in Direct Contact with Public Servants? (n=15)*

<i>Percentage of office time</i>	<i>Responses</i>	<i>Percentage of valid responses (n=14)</i>
<i>0 to 10</i>	9	64.3
<i>11 to 20</i>	1	7.1
<i>21 to 30</i>	2	14.3
<i>31 to 40</i>	2	14.3
<i>No response</i>	1	

(A further question asked if staff felt that the percentage of time they spent with public servants was typical among members' offices. Answers were inconclusive: four felt it was, three did not, one didn't know, and seven others did not respond.)

It seems that House of Commons staff do not spend a great deal of their own time interacting with public servants. Yet, how is this time used? Staff were asked how much of their time with public servants was spent on various activities. Unfortunately, many did not fully respond (Table 39).

Table 39. *What Percentage of This Contact is Spent on Each of the Following Activities? (n=15)*

	Up to 25% of all time spent with public servants	26–50%	51–75%	76–100%	Responses
<i>Issue/Information briefings</i>	9	2	–	2	13
<i>Constituent requests</i>	4	6	2	–	12
<i>General info. inquiries</i>	8	1	1	–	10
<i>Investigations for MP/party</i>	3	1	1	–	5

As with MPs, commons staff were asked what media they used to interact with public servants. This was qualified to exclude individual constituent matters, in order to focus directly on other roles and create a sharper comparison with the activities of constituency staff (Table 40). House of Commons staff gave slightly different responses to those of MPs.

Table 40. *Rank in Order the Ways in Which You are in Contact with Public Servants, Apart from Individual Constituent Matters (n=15)*

	Telephone	In person	Mail	E-mail	Fax
<i>First</i>	13	1	1	–	–
<i>Second</i>	–	1	2	6	2
<i>Third</i>	–	–	5	3	4
<i>Fourth</i>	–	4	2	2	3
<i>Fifth</i>	–	6	2	–	1
<i>No response</i>	2	3	3	4	5

How does this compare with MPs? While the telephone continues to be the most popular medium of communication, we can see that e-mail and faxes are used more by staff, compared to MPs' greater use of in-person meetings. And, when asked what were the *most effective* media for communicating with public servants (apart from constituent matters), House of Commons staff also expressed somewhat greater confidence than did MPs in e-mail particularly, although the phone and in-person meetings continue to be preferred (Table 41):

Table 41. *Rank in Order What Ways are Most Effective in Your View When You are in Contact with Public Servants, Apart from Individual Constituent Matters (n=15)*

	<i>Telephone</i>	<i>In person</i>	<i>Mail</i>	<i>E-mail</i>	<i>Fax</i>
<i>First</i>	11	2		2	
<i>Second</i>	2	4	3	1	1
<i>Third</i>		1	2	5	4
<i>Fourth</i>	1	2	2	2	3
<i>Fifth</i>		3	4	1	2
<i>No response</i>	1	3	4	4	5

Finally, House of Commons staff were asked to assess their relationships with public servants (Table 42).

Table 42. *In General, How Would You Say the Relations of your Office with Public Servants are? (n=15)*

<i>Fair</i>	5	33.3%
<i>Good</i>	7	46.7%
<i>Excellent</i>	2	13.3%
<i>Non-existent</i>	1	6.7%

Overall, it appears that the House of Commons staff in our small sample have reasonably good relations with public servants, and this interaction appears to be centred around issue briefings and general inquiries for information. While interaction mainly takes place by phone, e-mail is a significant medium of contact, more so than with MPs.

Constituency Staff

In contrast to House of Commons staff, constituency staff appear to have much more substantive contact with public servants, due to the major part of their job – dealing with constituent inquiries and requests.

Before looking directly at staff–public servant interaction, we should briefly discuss the nature of constituent requests. Every day, constituency staff across the nation together handle thousands of requests from constituents for assistance of one kind or another. The volume of requests varies considerably: some urban ridings receive dozens of new requests every day, while more suburban offices may only have a few new inquiries daily.

Generally speaking, constituency staff handle the bulk of cases without intervention from the member. Asked *What percentage of constituent requests for assistance require the member's personal attention?*, five of twelve said it was under 5%, three more said under 25%, and only one said it was over 50% (one did not respond). Two said the member was only involved at the specific insistence of the constituent.

While their volume varies between ridings, the nature of constituent requests are strikingly similar across Canada and are most likely to concern four major areas – immigration applications, employment insurance, income security for the elderly, and tax issues. When asked which departments most constituent requests for assistance were concerned with, both members and staff overwhelmingly listed the same three portfolios: Citizenship and Immigration, Human Resources Development Canada, and the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency. Additionally, Fisheries and Oceans was also important in Atlantic Canada, and Agriculture and Agri-Food had some significance for rural areas.

Many requests are simply for information or government forms. These can often be handled by constituency staff alone without contacting public servants, sometimes by consulting government web sites or directing the constituent to the right site (see the discussion on government web sites in Chapter 3). Many other requests are also relatively routine, such as checking the status of an immigration application or tracking down a lost pension cheque. But some requests are more unique and may require considerable effort: particularly those challenging a particular policy or practice or involving appeals of decisions.

The constituency staff in our small sample reported that when processing constituent cases, they approached different levels of officials: local department officials, regional department officials, officials in the National Capital Region, or minister's offices, depending on the nature of the case. However, it is clear that these staff deal primarily with local public servants in their immediate area.

Ten of twelve staff respondents (83.3%) reported that for both *routine* (common requests not requiring special efforts) and *short-term* requests (individual problems requiring some special effort), they were most likely to contact the local office of the relevant department. However, when dealing with *long-term* requests (individual problems requiring significant special efforts), six of twelve respondents said they were most likely to contact the relevant minister's office first. Four others said they were most likely to contact local officials, and two others ranked regional officials as most likely. (As for department officials in the National Capital Region, four ranked them as second-most likely, and six more said they were third-most likely, with two not responding.)¹⁷

A large number of constituent cases are so routine or familiar that constituency staff contact the same people over and over (Table 43).

Table 43. *What Percentage of Constituent Requests are Handled by Always Contacting the Same Public Servant or Small Unit (in Other Words, You Know Exactly What to Do and Who to Call)? (n=12)*

<i>Percentage of office time</i>	<i>Respondents</i>	<i>Percentage of valid responses</i>
<i>26 to 50</i>	1	11.1
<i>51 to 75</i>	3	33.3
<i>76 to 100</i>	5	55.6
<i>No response</i>	3	–

When asked to list portfolios or issues where this was most likely, staff identified the areas of highest volume: immigration, CCRA and HRDC issues, such as employment insurance and pensions.

The Technological Dimension

How does technology affect constituency staff relations with public servants? To answer this, we will break down the process of constituency cases into three parts. First, we will look at what media constituents use to make requests to members' offices; second, what media staff use to make inquiries to public servants; and third, how public servants communicate back to constituency staff. This gives us an overall picture of the role of technology in constituent casework (Table 44).

Table 44. *Rank in Order the Most Common Ways Constituents Contact Your Office with Requests for Assistance. (n=12)*

	<i>Telephone</i>	<i>Walk-in</i>	<i>Mail</i>	<i>E-mail</i>	<i>Fax</i>
<i>First</i>	12	–	–	–	–
<i>Second</i>	–	8	3	1	–
<i>Third</i>	–	3	6	2	1
<i>Fourth</i>	–	1	2	4	6
<i>Fifth</i>	–	–	1	5	5

Obviously in our small sample, constituent inquiries are primarily by telephone and then in-person, with e-mails and faxes well behind.¹⁸

Constituency staff were asked to rank the most common methods their office uses to contact government departments and agencies for constituent cases (Table 45). Again, despite the small sample, trends appear clear.

Table 45. *Rank in Order the Most Common Methods Your Office Uses to Contact Government Departments and Agencies for Constituent Cases (n=12)*

	<i>Telephone</i>	<i>E-mail</i>	<i>Mail</i>	<i>Fax</i>
<i>First</i>	9	–	–	3
<i>Second</i>	1	1	5	5
<i>Third</i>	2	4	2	3
<i>Fourth</i>	–	5	4	1
<i>No ranking given</i>	–	2	1	–

Note: While “in-person” was not included, respondents were given an “other” to rank as a form of media; none ranked this category.

Thus constituency staff rely heavily on the telephone when contacting public servants, but faxes are now the second-most important media. E-mail remains underused compared to other technologies.

Finally, slight differences can be seen when departments contact constituency offices. Asked to *Rank the most common methods used by government departments and agencies to contact [their] office in regard to constituent cases, (n=12)* constituency staff gave slightly different responses to the above (Table 46).

Table 46. *Rank in Order the Most Common Methods Used by Government Departments and Agencies to Contact Your Office in Regard to Constituent Cases (n=12)*

	<i>Telephone</i>	<i>E-mail</i>	<i>Mail</i>	<i>Fax</i>
<i>First</i>	8		3	1
<i>Second</i>	2	3	4	3
<i>Third</i>	2	1	2	5
<i>Fourth</i>	–	6	1	2
<i>No ranking given</i>	–	2	2	1

Note: Respondents were also given an “other” to rank as a form of media, but none used this category.

The telephone is still paramount. However, regular mail is now more important than faxes when departments respond to constituency offices. Again, e-mail is well behind all other media.

Even apart from the small sample size, these differences should not be overestimated, as staff report that their interaction with public servants does not generally cross different media categories. Constituency staff were asked *What percentage of the time do government departments and agencies*

correspond with you in the same media through which you originally contacted them (i.e., replying by e-mail to your e-mail)? Ten reported a symmetry 75% to 100% of the time, while one reported 50%, and another did not respond. Still, it is interesting to note that public servants appear somewhat more likely to reply by regular mail and that e-mail is not used much at any stage in constituent casework.

What conclusions can we draw from these findings? It is reasonable to hypothesize that constituency staff find it convenient and quick to make initial inquiries by telephone, while departments prefer to respond through formal correspondence. However, it is striking that neither group makes much use of e-mail, which presumably combines many of the advantages of both the telephone and regular mail.

The low priority of e-mail is also suggested in responses to the question *Are there ways in which the Internet and other information and communication technologies have made your job easier in recent years?* The responses to this question, presented in some detail earlier focused on the World Wide Web. Ten of twelve respondents reported that web sites allowed them to access information and forms much more quickly and thoroughly. In contrast, only four of twelve appeared to refer even indirectly to e-mail as having an effect.

How Can Things Be Improved? Views of Staff

We have already discussed MPs' views of their relationships with public servants and possible ways to improve them. Staff were also asked for their views, particularly for their views on the possible roles of technology.

House of Commons Staff

House of Commons staff were asked two open-ended questions about relationships with public servants and the role of technology. First, staff were asked *Can you identify ways in which your relations with public servants have been significantly assisted by new information and communication technologies?* Eleven of fifteen gave some response. Several mentioned e-mail has allowed for quicker and easier communication, while others noted government web sites allowed rapid and simple access to information and documents, as we saw in Chapter Three. Only one said technology had no effect: "It plays no role whatsoever." The office had no direct interaction with public servants; interaction was either at committee hearings or in briefings arranged through the minister's office.

Second, Commons staff were asked *Can you think of future ways in which information and communication technologies might improve relations between members' House of Commons offices and public servants?* Six did not respond at all, and a seventh reported that he could not think of any ways. Others suggested specific reforms, such as enhanced government web sites. One person wrote "in order to stop callers tying up five or more phone lines, the Ministerial web site needs to be more comprehensive and thorough" (it is not clear whether this means a minister's personal web pages or a

specific department web site), and another said “more info should be accessible directly at web sites.”

One staffer made an argument similar to that of many MPs, that technological issues were not important compared to attitudinal ones: “There isn’t any sanctioned channel of communication. We are like oil and water. Occasionally the Liberal Research Bureau or a minister’s office ... will stage a formal briefing at which political aides may ask formal questions. But nothing informal goes on; it is all carefully devised and witnessed dialogue.”

Constituency Staff

Recall that constituency staff rely particularly on the telephone rather than e-mail in their contact with public servants. The survey did not detect much feeling that things should be different.

When asked *In working on constituent requests for assistance, do you feel that sufficient use is being made of current information and communication technologies (e-mail, web sites, 1-800 numbers)?*, eight of twelve respondents replied in the affirmative – that is, that ICTs were being used sufficiently. One replied negatively, and three did not respond. This is hardly a movement for technological revolution! Although this was an open-ended question, few respondents elaborated. However, one placed blame on public servants, saying “most departments do not reply to requests via e-mail and most do not have 800 numbers.” (However, the respondent did not complain, as others did, that public servants’ e-mail addresses were not readily available.)

Yet, there may be valid explanations for this satisfaction with current use of ICTs. As one respondent said, “Government web sites provide good general information but by the time constituents call their MP, matters are more complicated.” Hence, constituency staff may prefer using the telephone for casework because the cases require conversations with public servants rather than simple questions and answers by e-mail. Faxes may also be preferred to e-mail for the transmission of documents, since the documents are usually on paper and must be scanned as images to be e-mailed; simply faxing is much simpler.

Staff were slightly more forthcoming when asked *Are there ways in which the Internet and other information and communication technologies have made your job easier in recent ways? Are there ways in which things could be improved in the future?* Responses to the first question have already been presented. Few responded directly to the second question, but for those who did, suggestions focused on e-mail. One person said “e-mail could do much to reduce fax contact with government,” and another said “more needs to be done to bring offices (MPs and departments) online and accessible through realtime software.”

As the latter point suggests, ICTs may only truly change how constituency offices and public servants interact if there are major innovations and initiatives that specifically create the infrastructure to allow greater communication. Until then, technologies are merely used as conveniences, without truly transformative impacts.

Conclusion

This chapter has reported and discussed a number of trends and evidence about relations between public servants and MPs and their staff, and both technological and non-technological dimensions. In general, our small survey suggests that the relationship is facilitated by tried-and-true technologies like the phone, more than e-mail and other more advanced ICTs. Certain technologies like the fax are integral to the relationship and particularly for serving constituents; yet, both members and staff do not appear to see technology as a key to enhancing or even transforming their relations with public servants.

Rather, underlying personal relationships, attitudes and orientations are fundamental. Members appear to seek new ways of building personal relationships with public servants and do not see ICTs playing a major role here. Some even argue technologies are standing in the way of stronger relationships by preventing “the humanness” that one MP spoke of.

Technology has created efficiencies and convenience without radically changing the nature of the relationship between MPs and public servants. This is somewhat surprising considering the momentum of ICTs in the vast new world of e-government as well as e-democracy. In the next chapter, we will examine briefly this momentum and possible roles for MPs.

CHAPTER 5

LINKING MEMBERS AND DEPARTMENTS

We have already discussed findings from our survey on current relations between members of Parliament and public servants and the role of technology. In this chapter, we report qualitative research on ways in which members and government departments might create new technological linkages and shared databases to enhance their relationship and service to constituents.

We will look first at how some members have created technologically advanced offices and at innovations in the government department that receives the most constituent inquiries from MPs. As we will see, technology has created a number of opportunities for coordination and improved service to Canadians. However non-technological issues remain very important, and the exact role for members is not always clear.

Databases and Virtual Offices

Previous chapters have given a general impression of how technology is used in members' offices and in relations with public servants. However, some members and their staff have pushed forward their own initiatives, developing their own databases and applications to create something close to a "virtual office." Eventually, these might allow greater coordination and linkages with public servants, through the sharing of data and easier transfer of files. However, any real and substantive linkages are unlikely for some time, for various reasons.

As an example, Tony Valeri, member of Parliament for Stoney Creek (Ontario), is one of a number of MPs who rely heavily on technology for handling and processing constituency casework. When a constituent contacts Mr. Valeri's office by any means with a request or concern, their contact information and details of their request/concern are recorded onto a database, using forms and software specifically designed for Mr. Valeri's office. This database allows information to be easily managed and cross-referenced – for example, with previous contact with the constituent or similar inquiries by other constituents.¹⁹

This data is stored on an on-line server located outside both the House of Commons and constituency offices. The server is backed up and protected with financial industry-standard privacy encryption. Having this data on-line allows Mr. Valeri and his staff to quickly access information from anywhere, even while travelling.

Mr. Valeri is not the only member to have developed his own software and systems for constituency casework. The office of Paul Macklin, MP for Northumberland (Ontario), has also developed its own on-line system with a private contractor. However, Mr. Macklin's system is designed for public access and includes on-line discussion boards and notices for community events.²⁰

Many more members are developing such initiatives. Louis Bard, chief information officer of the House of Commons, reports that his office makes every effort to assist members in developing and using their preferred IT resources, within the constraints of members' budgets, staff resources and the unavoidable fact that different members want different things.²¹ Most members also receive support from their party caucus IT services.

Could such initiatives eventually be developed to the point that they allow members not just to read and transfer files within their own offices but to public servants as well? It is not inconceivable. An eventual system might allow constituency staff to allow access to, or even transfer, entire data files for public servants' attention. This could greatly reduce delays in updating or filling in information, allowing both staff and public servants to concentrate on solving problems rather than chasing and clarifying details.

To explore this very briefly, we will look at two areas of interest – information databases themselves and the development of on-line or “virtual” offices. However, it is difficult to identify and classify these initiatives, for several reasons. First, they are often developed with very little coordination with either parliamentary information services, caucus IT staff, or both. Hence there is no central tracking of initiatives. Second, the success of initiatives is heavily dependent on staff continuity. Systems may be developed by IT-savvy staff who leave for other jobs, taking with them their familiarity and knowledge of the system and thus reducing its utility. A third and methodological problem is the difficulty of classifying initiatives by their proper industry categories. Members may report having a “network” or developing their own “application” or “solution” when these are not the correct terms.

Databases

Nearly all members of Parliament maintain a basic Microsoft Access database of constituents' names and addresses, often using information from Elections Canada voters lists. However, beyond this, the use and extent of databases varies considerably. Some members maintain only the basic list of names and addresses; others, such as Mr. Valeri, have extensive files of constituency cases. Members may also have customized the software for their databases, although often these are minor modifications to the Microsoft product.

Virtual Offices

As noted, Mr. Valeri is able to access constituent data on-line through his laptop computer. It is reasonable to speculate that many other members would like to develop a “virtual office” of files and applications, particularly considering the amount of travel they undertake and the need to maintain physical offices in both Ottawa and their constituency.

Currently there are clear differences in how members' two offices operate. Members' House of Commons offices are supported by parliamentary IT services and operate entirely within the parliamentary network and security firewall. Meanwhile, constituency offices have access to a secure

but more basic network, G-Net, which operates by dial-in access and can also be used by members and staff while travelling. Some members and constituency offices also rely on private Internet service providers, who supply and support a wide range of services and initiatives.

Working within these networks, members *may* be able to transfer files, view their schedules and correspondence, etc. However, the need for security firewalls may limit their access. For example, members may be able to access their constituency office network through their laptops while travelling but not the more secure House of Commons network. G-Net is scheduled to be replaced in 2003 by a new constituency communications network that gives constituency offices more enhanced services. However, issues of security remain important and militate against the development of truly “virtual,” seamless offices that can easily transfer information or provide instant access.

As these details suggest, it is not inconceivable that such electronic links could some day be created between members’ offices and public servants. However, the coordination and development of secure yet accessible linkages would be an immense task. As noted, right now, even constituency and House of Commons offices are linked by different systems and are not always seamlessly accessible to each other. Hence, moving to networks that coordinate 301 members’ offices and potentially dozens of departments and agencies, each with their own computer systems and firewalls, is not in the near future, by any means.

However, it may be possible for some interested departments to create systems to coordinate with interested members’ offices. In the following section, we will see how one government department is pursuing a strategy close to this. However, the role of MPs in this technological initiative is not clear.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada

No government department receives more constituent-related inquiries from MPs than Citizenship and Immigration Canada. In this section, we look at how this department has tried to enhance its relationship with MPs, through both technological and non-technological means. The department’s goal is to make all individual casefiles accessible on-line. However, as we will see, this does not necessarily include a role for members of Parliament.

Immigration Casework

Let us begin by describing the nature of immigration inquiries. In our survey, members and constituency staff both ranked Citizenship and Immigration as the department with which they had the second-most contact, after Human Resources Development Canada. However, Human Resources inquiries covered a large range of issues, while Citizenship and Immigration inquiries are almost exclusively concerned with immigration applications. Hence, immigration cases appear to be the largest single category of constituency work for MPs.

In some urban constituencies, immigration inquiries are exceptionally high, and one or more staff

members may deal exclusively with immigration cases. But, even in other ridings, immigration inquiries remain significant. One MP from a mostly rural riding outside central Canada said the number of his immigration cases was “surprising.” While our survey did not measure the proportion of immigration cases to overall constituency work, ministerial assistants estimate that in some ridings in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal, immigration may comprise 60% to 80% of all constituency casework, and the annual number of all immigration inquiries to members is over forty thousand.²²

Despite the number of requests for their assistance, members of Parliament have no direct power over immigration case decisions. Immigration applications are approved or denied by officers of Citizenship and Immigration Canada, whose decisions are based on established criteria and processes. Similarly, appeals are decided by established and independent offices or tribunals. To preserve the integrity of these adjudicative processes, members of Parliament must be careful not to appear to compel a particular decision or outcome.

Instead, MPs work around the edges of the process. Members and their staff assist constituents in understanding procedures and completing applications; ensure that Immigration officers are given all pertinent information; obtain information on the progress of cases; and ensure that procedures are followed and timely decisions are rendered. Members often do not take a position on whether or not cases should be approved but focus on the process instead. (This occasionally leads to news stories where high-profile MPs have been identified with controversial applicants, despite members’ emphasis that they are focused on the process rather than on the merit of applications.)²³ While MPs cannot directly demand that a particular decision be made, they can argue for the expediting of decisions.

Technology and Work

Much of the work in immigration cases is highly routine, as constituency staff answer inquiries, direct people to web sites, and download or distribute application forms. A high proportion of inquiries concern the status of an application, and staff contact Citizenship and Immigration staff, usually by phone, to find out how things are progressing.

The major technologies used for these routine activities are web sites and the telephone. However, *faxes* become more important as cases become more complex, because of the need to transfer documents. In cases where information needs to be added to a file or written authorization is necessary to proceed, faxes – and not e-mail – are the preferred technology. This trend was made clear by several members and their staff.

Regular mail appears to be used mainly for direct correspondence with the minister of citizenship and immigration. Many offices appear to send such letters routinely for all cases, while other offices send letters only for appeals and unusual cases. Regular mail to public servants does not appear to be used much.

Thus, most contact between MPs' staff and *public servants* is by telephone or fax. While department web sites appear to be used extensively, as noted in the previous chapters, e-mail again does not appear to be a particularly significant method of communication. Why is this?

An obvious point is that it is simpler to fax original paper documents than to scan them into electronic images for e-mailing (especially since many offices may not have image scanners). However, a second reason given by some respondents, including ones who generally expressed confidence in technology, was that they considered faxes more reliable, whereas they were not sure e-mails would arrive at the right address or in a readable format. The high volume of immigration cases means that staff may not always deal with the same public servants, but can rely on a general fax address. This attitude appears to be shared by those inside Immigration; according to a ministerial assistant, faxes are considered a more certain method of communication, "we know we'll get it."²⁴

Furthermore, both case volume and the complexity of individual cases can mean a great deal of documentation, and both staff and public servants may be more comfortable dealing with paper copies than relying on electronic storage, even if it may seem the latter may be seen by others as more reliable. Martha Nixon, assistant deputy minister for operations, confirmed the department had a "preference for paper" because of the "need for records and assurance."²⁵ Finally, the adjudicative nature of immigration decisions and their importance to applicants encourages more formal communication through hard-copy letters, which can be faxed or snail-mailed, rather than on the seemingly more informal medium of e-mail messages.

Department Initiatives

Citizenship and Immigration Canada has long recognized the high levels of immigration inquiries that are directed at MPs. In this section, we look at some of the ways the department has tried to maintain and improve relations with MPs and their offices.

Non-Technological

In general, departmental initiatives directed *specifically* at members of Parliament have focused on building personal knowledge and relationships rather than technological solutions. This of course mirrors the concerns in the previous chapter by MPs who emphasized building personal relationships with public servants as more important than technological changes alone. As we will see, while Citizenship and Immigration has a number of relevant technological initiatives as well, they may be of less importance than other methods.

One important department initiative is regular meetings between MPs' staff and Citizenship and Immigration local offices. Martha Nixon says her department encourages local and regional offices to have regular liaisons with members' offices and generally to build a "good rapport and relationship." Exact data on these meetings is not available, as meetings are initiated and organized solely by local offices; however, the Greater Toronto Area has had quarterly meetings since the late 1990s, and meetings are held in Montreal and Vancouver on a slightly less regular basis.

At these meetings, public servants explain how requests from members' offices are handled, and constituency staff put forward their own inquiries and concerns about procedures and processes. These meetings may include tours of department offices, so that staff see the physical setting in which their contacts work. Other related initiatives have included a tour for Toronto-area staff of the Buffalo immigration offices, including meetings with visa officers who further explain how decisions are made. Visits to airport receiving-facilities are also planned for the future. It should also be stressed that these activities involve members of all parties, and there appear to be no special programs or briefings for government members.

Although these activities are directed at constituency staff more than at members, several MPs remarked in interviews that these meetings were helpful and appreciated. Other initiatives, such as sponsoring trips to visit overseas visa offices, are directed at MPs themselves. According to Martha Nixon, the previous²⁶ minister of citizenship and immigration "always [took] a delegation of MPs [from both sides of the House] who get the same briefings [as the minister], and they come back understanding" the issues and process. Ms. Nixon went on to say, "The very best [initiative] is getting key MPs out to [international] offices and talking to people. It's a real eye-opener. Members sit down with people to understand how the system works, why it takes so long to apply, and the complexity of the local scene." Other initiatives include special briefings for new members and their staff to ensure they are "up to speed" on immigration issues and procedures.

Such initiatives are of course intended both to build personal contact and relationships and to give MPs and their staff broader understandings of processes and procedures. As noted, members suggested that building personal relationships was more important than simply harnessing the latest technologies for improving relations between themselves and public servants; once personal relations have been established, it is then easier to rely on the conveniences of ICTs. So, is there evidence here of a subsequent technological agenda to build on these more personal initiatives?

Technological

Priority-calling: As noted above, members' staff regularly telephone Citizenship and Immigration staff to discuss cases and issues. In at least some regional offices, members have been given special priority lines, either to reach particular public servants or simply to ensure they are not caught in the long queue of callers. However, this does not appear to be a consistent practice and is largely at the discretion of local and/or regional managers.

Web sites: As mentioned, government web sites are important sources of information for MPs' staff (and constituents themselves). J. Springer agreed that web sites were "our biggest tool for Members' offices," since they provide a high level of information without tying up public servants or ministerial staff. Senior officials encourage Immigration units to think of "the web site as a front door," according to Martha Nixon, and hence to provide comprehensive and accessible information on web sites.

However, no special web sites or pages are designed specifically for MPs and their staff. Presumably

this is because all the necessary routine information is available on web pages for the public, while complex cases require personal contact and discussion. Hence, web sites are “a good starting place ... to find background information” (according to Ms. Nixon), but not for inquiries on specific cases. Web sites and/or e-mail may be used in the future to ensure MPs are informed about new developments and issues, making members “feel part of it rather than out of it.” But again, such sites may simply be accessible to anyone seeking updates, without special areas for members.

Electronic case management: Recall our speculation in the earlier section about the potential of placing constituent cases on-line to make them accessible to members and public servants. And indeed, Citizenship and Immigration Canada is pursuing a version of this, in conjunction with broader operational changes. Its Global Case Management System, scheduled for completion in 2004, will integrate all case matters, from both international and domestic offices and from initial applications to subsequent appeals and enforcement. Currently, cases may be filed in several ways and with different software or other technologies. Following from the reformed management system, the eventual goal is to have a seamless on-line database of cases, complete with associated documents, easily accessible to all authorized persons.

Such a system would be of great interest to members of Parliament, since many constituent inquiries concern the status of files. If members’ offices had their own link to the Citizenship and Immigration database, with reliable and direct access to its case files, they could serve constituents much more quickly with less paperwork and contact with public servants. In particular, since a large proportion of inquiries are concerned solely with establishing the status of cases, direct links into the database could greatly simplify the work of members’ staff.

However, the department’s eventual goal, beyond the 2004 deadline for establishing the basic case management system, is to allow *all* individuals to access their own case files directly, through use of personal identification numbers and other appropriate privacy measures. This would bypass members entirely, as constituents would no longer need help for simple inquiries or in clarifying the status of applications. In fact, privacy concerns may actually make it easier to provide direct access for citizens to see their own files than for members’ offices to view them, as staff would likely have to demonstrate that they have obtained the applicant’s permission before accessing the files. (Other technological initiatives include developing web application forms that cannot be submitted until all information is completed, thus reducing the number of incomplete applications, delays and need for members’ assistance.)

Thus, the effect of this technological initiative on MPs’ offices may be indirect rather than direct. Giving individuals access to casefiles would eliminate a great deal of relatively routine but time-consuming work for members’ offices and would presumably allow staff and members to devote more time and attention to complex cases. On the other hand, it is likely that many constituents without computer access or skills or with language difficulties will continue to rely on members’ offices for assistance in accessing their on-line information.

Conclusion

Clearly, Citizenship and Immigration Canada has taken a number of steps to enhance its relations with members of Parliament. However, the most important initiatives for MPs are non-technological in nature, while the department's various technological reforms are focused more broadly at serving the public. While these innovations may indirectly affect MPs' offices, there are few directed particularly at members alone.

Conclusion: Prospects for Linkage?

What can we conclude about the prospects for direct on-line links between members' offices and government departments? Obviously such links would require considerable effort and investment. But the larger issue is whether departmental initiatives will simply reach over members' heads to citizens directly, without special technological provisions for MPs. Given the level of investment and coordination required, it appears unlikely that substantive on-line linkages will be developed specifically between members' offices and government departments.

The potential does exist for at least some small linkages and transfer points, as some members' offices are clearly developing, or at least *interested* in developing, the capacity to transfer more and more information on-line. However, any real linkage will require more effort and enthusiasm on the part of both members (and staff) and public servants.

As we have seen in previous chapters, many constituency offices do not seem to even use basic e-mail much to communicate with public servants. This may be likely due to the continuing advantages of telephones and faxes and the difficulty of finding public servants' e-mail addresses, but more enhanced networks and possibly less staff turnover might be needed to prompt the bulk of members' offices to move to on-line data transfer systems. Similarly, it is not clear how government departments can be convinced of the advantages of building linkages with members' offices, over providing direct access to all citizens. While members are likely to have an important role in assisting *some* constituents to navigate new technological practices, this is an indirect effect rather than a technological enhancement of their relations with public servants.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter we draw some tentative conclusions about how technology is enhancing the relationship between MPs and public servants and suggest key areas for future discussion.

Better Service?

The focus of this study has been *better service to Canadians* through enhanced interactions between public servants and MPs. Is there evidence that ICTs enhance this relationship and contribute to better service, either now or in the future?

Our evidence has shown important ways in which technology has assisted members' offices, particularly in handling constituent requests. Fax machines are integral for the transmission of documents, and government web sites provide a great deal of information and forms for staff as they assist constituents. All these allow for more timely and accurate service to constituents. More broadly, the Internet is also essential for research staff, and the scrutiny of department and agency reports is greatly assisted by electronic versions.

Yet, if our sample survey is accurate, much remains relatively untouched by the new technologies. The telephone remains the most prevalent medium for communication with public servants, both by members and their staff. And e-mail, while important for communication within the members' offices and with other legislators, appears from our evidence not to be used extensively when communicating with public servants. More advanced initiatives, such as on-line databases with transferable files, are at best in the very fledgling stage.

Information and communication technologies may not be fully used because a significant minority of members still do not personally use the Internet. But staff appear to be well-versed with technologies, and in the case of at least some members, the decision not to personally use e-mail or the World Wide Web is a deliberate personal choice and one not necessarily due to simple unfamiliarity with ICTs. These MPs may actually feel constituents are better served, and in a more personal way, without always using the latest technology.

Indeed, when asked how their relations with public servants can be improved, the members and staff in our survey tended to focus on personal, non-technological matters, and, even when prompted, they generally did not identify ICTs as a major priority. Instead, many respondents felt more could be done to help them build personal relationships and contact with public servants – only after which ICTs might be truly useful. The difficulty for at least some, rather than technological barriers, were the strictures that discouraged direct contact between members and public servants in favour of going through ministers' offices. For these respondents, this is what prevented them from working more closely with public servants to provide better service to constituents.

A further issue is the role of staff, who are often the link between MPs and public servants and may determine the possibilities and potential of ICTs for these relationships. Staff interact with constituents and are often the initiators of contact with public servants, and they are responsible for much of the information that flows back and forth. Furthermore, unlike MPs, staff are expected to be conversant with standard ICTs and are often in the best position to know how technological changes might affect relations between MPs and public servants. But as noted, this reliance on staff may leave MPs vulnerable. Web sites and other innovations are often developed by one or two staff; when they move on to other employment, however, they may take the relevant knowledge with them.

To sum up, the overall picture is mixed. Certain technologies are allowing members and their staff to better serve constituents. But other technologies appear underutilized, for a variety of possible reasons.

The Limits of Technology

The mixed and somewhat ambivalent role for technology in our findings fits with other studies that argue technological possibilities are often limited by existing structures and norms. Past forecasts that ICTs have or will have a tremendous impact on government and legislative representation are being supplemented or challenged by studies that find that while technology has created a number of obvious conveniences, it has not had a transformative effect and is not likely to do so in the near future.

For example, Melissa Marschall and Wayne Curtin's 2000 study of the American House of Representatives found little evidence "to believe that the legislative process is undergoing the kind of changes that will undermine traditional institutional structures or longstanding norms that characterize institutional procedures." They observed that the majority of congressional offices were "merely coping with innovations in technology" rather than adapting them in more innovative and strategic ways.²⁷

Similarly, Jane Fountain's large study of American federal agencies and ICTs argues persuasively that technology cannot easily break down existing organizational and institutional structures. Fountain explores how "the embeddedness of government actors in cognitive, cultural, social and institutional structures influences the design, perceptions, and uses of the Internet and related IT."²⁸ Sometimes these "embedded" or pre-existing aspects can help enable technological possibilities by providing the right circumstances and opportunities. But, at other times, they can frustrate technologies that clash against existing norms, structures and networks.

We see evidence of both types of influence in our study. The speed and portability of new ICTs has provided obvious benefits to members for inter-office communication and other day-to-day logistic activity. But this is not necessarily a transformative effect – it simply provides conveniences within existing patterns of behaviour. Similar effects can be seen for relations with public servants and assisting constituents. Certain technologies have been heavily utilized because they are cheaper and

faster than traditional processes – such as faxes, which allow instant transmission of written documents to specific recipients. But again, the effect is more one of *convenience* than one of *transformation*, as the technologies appear to largely fit into existing patterns of behaviour. Other technologies that do not fit the current needs and behaviour of actors – most notably e-mail, which neither allows for instant conversation like the telephone nor the easy transfer of hard-copy documents – are used less often.

The limited effect of technology is also seen when we look particularly at interaction between members and public servants. The potential of technology to enable new social and professional networks between these groups is restricted by powerful existing norms and structures. Our evidence suggests that members find it difficult to overcome the cultural and organizational norms that deter public servants from becoming too close or intimate with legislators. Technologies such as e-mail do not help here; while they are useful for informal and convenient contact within established networks of actors, they appear currently not to have much ability to establish new contacts or understandings between MPs and public servants.

Fountain and others argue that technology can have transformative effects, but only in the right circumstances and with the right combination of organizational and institutional enablers. If such “cognitive, cultural, social and institutional” factors exist, ICTs may have the potential to transform the relationship between MPs and public servants, particularly in delivering services to Canadians. But what might these factors be? The following section discusses potential enablers as well as barriers to the greater use of ICTs between MPs and public servants.

Towards Transformation

As we have seen, the technological aspects of MPs’ ombudsman roles appear to have followed the needs of the role rather than changing the role itself. Members’ offices have grown to use fax machines and web sites, and occasionally e-mail, seemingly without the need for an overall technological strategy and without a wholesale change in their role and relationship with public servants.

To transform the relationship between MPs and public servants through technology requires not only money and time but a shift in larger attitudes and a willingness to actually integrate members into the service-delivery framework. For example, in the case of the on-line access plans of Citizenship and Immigration Canada, members must be factored directly into the planning and design of the systems. Other departments and agencies could also allow greater access to departmental databases and other resources. This is probably possible, although the technical difficulties (particularly access through security firewalls) would be substantial and costly.

But both currently and historically, the role of members has been to work around the edges of the framework and largely outside the system – assisting constituents with unusual needs, those who do not feel empowered to deal directly with government, and in areas of very high demand such as

immigration. Similarly, ministers and public servants have their own highly established structures built on principles of ministerial responsibility, due process and other institutional norms. These norms can accommodate occasional direct intervention by MPs but usually only on an exceptional basis. Hence, they channel the use of technology, making technology fit within established patterns rather than letting new roles develop through technology.

Other possible ICT innovations also appear far off. For example, technology appears to have had few major effects on MPs' scrutiny or committee roles. Receiving government reports in electronic form is convenient for elected officials but hardly transformative. Neither is there evidence that technology has allowed greater collaboration by standing committees, particularly through the exchange of documents and information. While it is convenient for MPs to e-mail documents back and forth, or to use personal digital assistants to communicate during meetings, technology does not appear to be affecting the MP–public service relationship in these areas.

What are the “enablers” that could create larger technological links between MPs' offices and public servants and transform the current relationship? Above all else is a clear determination – on the part of both MPs and public servants – that members can and should play more of a systematic role in the delivery of public services. Furthermore, they require clear signals from the ministerial level that MPs and public servants can and should be in regular and substantive contact.

It is not at all clear that these exist. Rather, the existing cognitive and cultural norms appear to deter rather than encourage such contact. While MPs and public servants appear to have reasonably good working relationships, these are constrained substantively by the principle of ministerial responsibility and control. As MPs in our survey reported, the chief barriers to greater and more enhanced contact with public servants are primarily attitudinal rather than technological. More opportunities for MPs and public servants to meet and get to know each other would be welcome – perhaps sessions organized by region as well as by department or function. But even the existing opportunities appear not to offer much in the way of genuine dialogue and reciprocal exchange, they are more about getting to know one another superficially rather than building a strong appreciation of their different roles and the possibilities of the relationship.

Moving beyond these simple roles and enabling real transformation requires a change in assumptions about the role of members of Parliament in the delivery of public services and information. Historically, the trend has been a *reduction* of members' roles in delivering public services, in order to root out political favouritism and place decisions in the hands of neutral and professional public servants. Initiatives to consult members on the distribution of public funds – a widespread practice a hundred years ago – are today highly controversial and often challenged.²⁹ To launch new, integrative technological initiatives would represent an *increase* in members' roles. Are Canadians, public servants, and members themselves willing to accept this?

It may be that members do not even seek such a heightened role. Our sample survey showed a considerable variance in the level of interaction between members and public servants; some MPs

interact with public servants on a daily basis while others report interaction only a few times a year. This suggests that some members have other priorities. Certainly a few members in our survey indicated that they perceive that their primary role is to represent Canadians in policy-making and the scrutiny of government rather than to handle incidental constituency casework. On the other hand, other members do see constituency casework as their primary function and appear to seek a greater and more substantive role in helping to better serve Canadians.

But regardless of members' different perspectives, the growing scope of e-government in Canada requires continuing innovation and response by members of Parliament. As the public service makes more and more use of ICTs, and as Canadians themselves grow to expect more use of technology in the delivery of public services, MPs must constantly explore how their roles are affected and how they might participate even more than at present in connecting government and Canadians together.

Clearly, these are issues that require more discussion. Should information and communication technologies be allowed to create new patterns of behaviour, such as a more organized and planned integration of members into the delivery of public services? Or should technology be kept within established patterns, with clear lines drawn between members and public servants even when ICTs could bring them closer together? Is there a middle ground that will allow greater use of technologies to produce better service for Canadians, while preserving ministerial responsibility and lines of accountability?

Questions for Future Discussion

This report closes with questions that arise from the above themes. We present five sets of questions directed at five important stakeholder groups: members of Parliament; public servants; ministers and their offices; information technology staff; and, finally, Canadians as a whole.

Questions for Members of Parliament

- Should constituency casework be a primary or a secondary role for members of Parliament?
- Should members become more involved than at present in ensuring constituents are as well served by government as possible?
- Are modern technologies leading to increased expectations by constituents for faster resolutions to their concerns?
- Are there barriers to the use of technology between MPs and public servants that could be reasonably reduced or overcome?
- Do members seek even greater integration and technological links to government departments and agencies?

- Should members and public servants directly interact even more closely and substantively, or does this unacceptably blur lines of accountability and ministerial responsibility?

Questions for Public Servants

- When Canadians request assistance from their member of Parliament in dealing with government, does this imply that regular public-service processes have failed?
- What is the appropriate role for members of Parliament who are approached for assistance by constituents?
- Are departments and agencies doing enough to support members in these efforts? In particular, are they ensuring that technologies are being used as much as is feasible?
- Should public servants and members directly interact even more closely and substantively, or does this unacceptably blur lines of accountability and ministerial responsibility?

Questions for Ministers and their Offices

- Is it appropriate for members of Parliament and public servants to be in regular and sustained contact with each other, or should their interaction be mediated through ministers' offices?
- Under what circumstances would ministers' offices be willing to devolve the necessary resources and support to members of Parliament so that MPs can directly assist constituents without overloading either ministers' offices or public servants?
- Should current government on-line initiatives factor in a role for members of Parliament, or is this not necessary when the goal is to provide direct services to all Canadians?
- Should public servants and members directly interact even more closely and substantively, or does this unacceptably blur lines of accountability and ministerial responsibility?

Questions for Information Technology Staff

- Is it possible to develop networks and applications to link MPs and public servants that will satisfy the needs of a majority of members?
- Do problems of staff and member turnover make it unlikely that advanced information and communication technologies and systems can be sustained over time?
- At what point must security concerns always override initiatives to improve services to the public?

Questions for Canadians

- How important should the ombudsman role be for members of Parliament? In other words, to what extent should Canadians expect MPs to assist them in dealing with government?
- Do the conveniences and timeliness of modern technologies mean Canadians can and should expect quicker and more efficient service from their MPs?
- Do Canadians trust members of Parliament more than they do public servants to ensure the best delivery of public services?
- How can members and public servants strike a balance in their roles to best meet the needs and desires of Canadians?

NOTES

- 1 Following the usage of various agencies such as the Ontario Ombudsman, this study uses “ombudsman” and “ombudsmen” as gender-neutral terms.
- 2 Philip Norton and David M. Wood, *Back From Westminster: British Members of Parliament and Their Constituents* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1993), p. 20.
- 3 David Docherty, *Mr. Smith Goes to Ottawa: Life in the House of Commons* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997); and David Docherty, “Citizens and Legislators: Different Views on Representation,” in Neil Nevitte, ed., *Value Change and Governance in Canada*. The Trends Project Series (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).
- 4 Gordon Aiken, *The Backbencher: Trials and Tribulations of a Member of Parliament* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 87.
- 5 Docherty, *Mr. Smith Goes to Ottawa*, p. 171.
- 6 Ibid.; Docherty, “Citizens and Legislators,” in Nevitte, *Change and Governance in Canada*.
- 7 Docherty, “Citizens and Legislators,” in Nevitte, *Change and Governance in Canada*, p. 191.
- 8 Docherty, *Mr. Smith Goes to Ottawa*, p. 190.
- 9 Peter C. McCreath, *The People’s Choice: The Inside Story on Being an MP* (Tantallon, N.S.: Four East Publishers, 1995), p. 69.
- 10 Docherty, “Citizens and Legislators,” in Nevitte, *Change and Governance in Canada*, pp. 182–83.
- 11 Survey data was processed by Andrea Rounce, doctoral candidate, Department of Political Science, Carleton University. However, responsibility for interpretations of data remains solely with the report author.
- 12 See David Docherty, “Out of Town? Alone? Need Someone to Talk To?,” *Canadian Political Science Association Bulletin* 30, no. 1 (May 2001), pp. 4–6. For comparison, Melissa Marschall and Wayne Curtin’s similar study of American congressional representatives and ICTs yielded only a 15% response rate for *written* surveys that could be completed by staff, despite aggressive follow-up by the investigators. See Melissa J. Marschall and Wayne Curtin, “Communications Technology and the U.S. House of Representatives” (unpublished paper, Department of Government and International Studies, University of South Carolina, 2000).
- 13 Docherty, “Out of Town?,” *Canadian Political Science Association Bulletin*, p. 5.
- 14 A further difficulty was the need to find a sufficiently *random* sample. Certain members of Parliament are very supportive of research inquiries and particularly of technology issues. However, in order to ensure that the survey properly captured the broad range of all members’ attitudes and practices, such members were not disproportionately targeted.
- 15 Marschall and Curtin, “Communications Technology and the U.S. House of Representatives” (unpublished), p. 20.
- 16 Docherty, *Mr. Smith Goes to Ottawa*, p. 186.
- 17 This data cannot be presented succinctly in tabular form and thus is summarized in paragraph format.
- 18 We are not aware of any past Canadian studies that might allow us to gauge trends prior to the widespread use of faxes and/or the Internet. Interestingly, a 1986 survey of British MPs found

that most constituent inquiries were made by personal letter and then in person, and only about ten per cent of initial inquiries were made by telephone. However, this may be explained by the limited staff and office resources available to British legislators: in other words, there may not have been anyone to consistently answer the phone throughout the business day. See Richard Rawlings, “The MP’s complaints service,” *Modern Law Review* 53, no. 1 (January 1990), p. 29.

- 19 Interview with Tony Valeri, MP, 25 September 2002.
- 20 Interview with Andrew Ryan, executive assistant to Paul Macklin, MP, 28 September 2001.
- 21 Interview with Louis Bard, chief information officer, House of Commons, 19 April 2002.
- 22 Interview with Jamie Springer and Luc Fournier, who were at the time of interview, special assistants to the Hon. Elinor Caplan, minister of citizenship and immigration, August 2001.
- 23 See, for example, Campbell Clark, “Day letter to Caplan sparks row,” *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 2 November 2001, p. A11.
- 24 Interview with Luc Fournier.
- 25 Interview with Martha Nixon, assistant deputy minister for operations, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 22 November 2001.
- 26 At the time of interviews, the Hon. Elinor Caplan was minister of citizenship and immigration. The Hon. Denis Paradis became minister on 15 January 2002; however, the change in ministers does not appear to have affected the initiatives described here.
- 27 Marschall and Curtin, “Communications Technology and the U.S. House of Representatives” (unpublished) p. 34 and p. 33, respectively.
- 28 Jane E. Fountain, *Building the Virtual State: Information Technology and Institutional Change* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2001), p. 88.
- 29 Kate Jaiment and Rick Mofina, “MP attacks \$2-billion ‘pork-barrel,’ ” *The Ottawa Citizen*, 6 February 6 2002, p. A3.

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