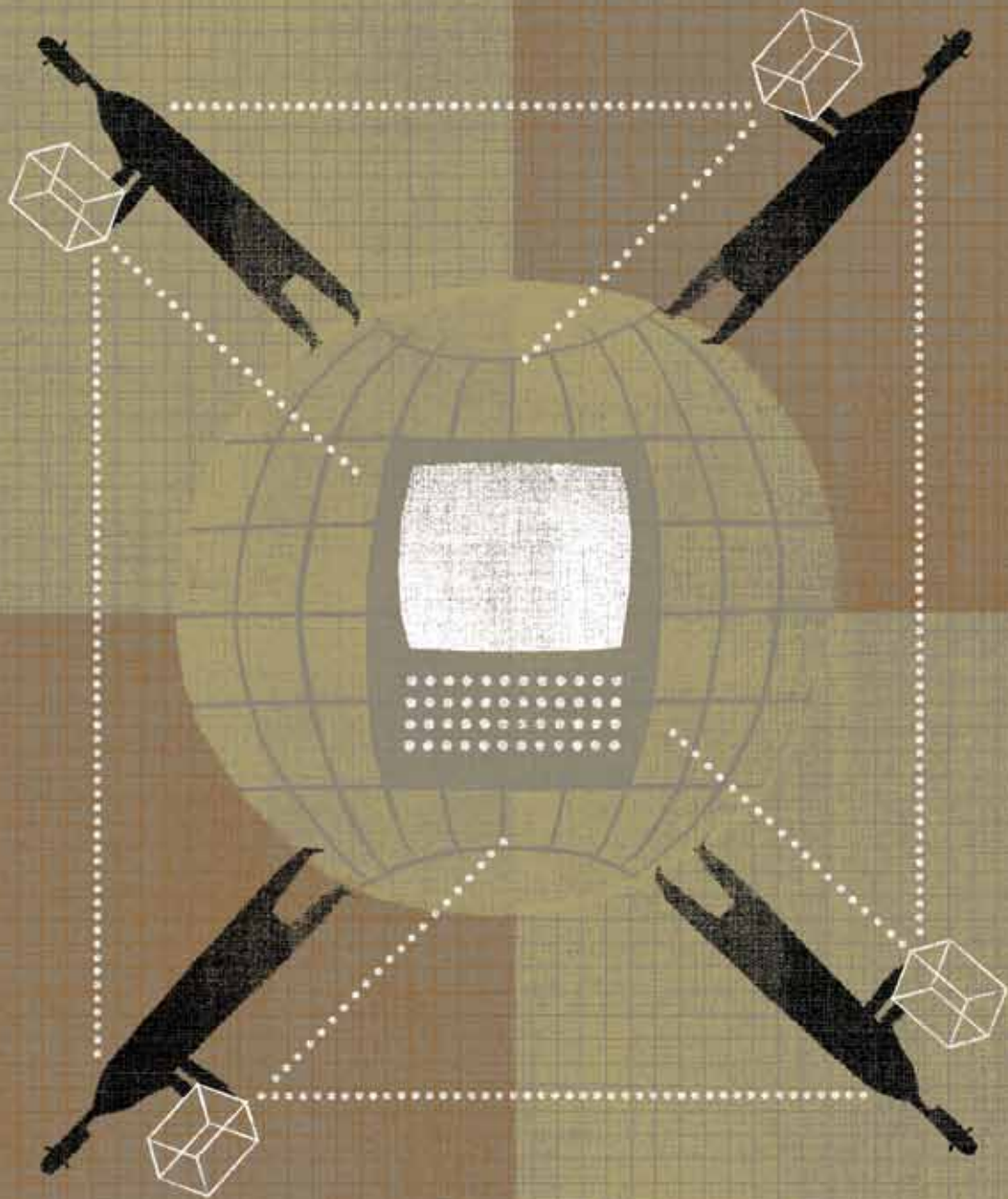# Kansas City Identifies Four Key Factors to a Successful Online Financial Transparency Project

BY MARK MACK

A successful transparency initiative is a lot of work. This is something the Kansas City, Missouri (KCMO), budget office understands well. Kansas City started a citywide transparency initiative in 2011 to find a better way to connect with the public, and the initiative trickled down to the finance department (which is part of the Office of Management and Budget) in 2014.

Today, Kansas City's Online Fiscal Transparency program includes:

- **Open Data KC**, an open data dashboard that houses datasets on all 311 calls, fees, dockets, audits, and development, as well as legislative information.

- **Open Budget KC**, an open budget platform that provides a graphical representation of KCMO's activity budget, including several years of history.

- **KC Balancing Act**, an interactive budgeting tool (i.e., a web tool that allows residents to experience balancing the budget using real budget data).

- **KCStat**, a data-driven approach to improve city services that is used as an active social media portfolio (i.e., posting information from the city's data platforms to Twitter and Facebook to help gain public and media attention).

Since starting its online fiscal transparency initiative in 2014, the Kansas City Office of Management and Budget has identified four key factors to the program's success:

1. Start out with executive support.

2. Start simple.

3. Know who your audience is (and isn't).

4. Remember that transparency goals can evolve over time, so adapt accordingly.

START WITH SUPPORT FROM THE TOP

KCMO started its online financial transparency program with support from elected officials, which the city says is a must. The Kansas City mayor was a big champion of the project

and a major contributor to getting the processes started. According to Scott Huizenga, budget officer, Office of Management and Budget, "If the top is not on board, you're pretty much dead on arrival."

After achieving executive buy-in, it's up to the department in charge to make the initiative a success. In Kansas City, the finance department initially took on the project, but it was the Office of Management and Budget that made it their own. The department didn't have a lot of direction as to how the effort should go, but staff believed it would be a useful project for the public and for building the office's resources and reputation.

Fast forward five years, and the open budget platform is a significant part of the city's strategic plan initiative. None of this would have been possible without buy-in from the government's executive leadership, as well as the ownership of the project within the Office of Management and Budget.

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START SIMPLE

When the mayor started the city's transparency initiative city in 2011, he and the city manager were looking for a way to communicate program results to the public in a manner that was clear, short, and visual. They came up with the KCStat Dashboard, a data-driven approach to improving city services. The budget office in KCMO was interested in creating similar outcomes in the financial realm.

"Like most great finance departments, we tend to speak very 'financey,' and most people don't understand, so we were trying to simplify our message to resonate more with the residents," said Huizenga. To do this, Kansas City wanted to link program outcomes to finances. They believed that relating program outcomes to operating, debt, and reserve levels would give residents the context needed to understand the information and provide informative feedback to the city.

Kansas City found that creating the online fiscal transparency tools it wanted was not a linear process. The program was built from the ground up, working within the Office of

Management and Budget's limitations. The office did not have dedicated staff to run the online platforms, for example, so the scale of the project was limited to the time department staff could give it. Starting small and working within the limitations of department personnel allowed the program to grow as the Office of Management and Budget had the ability. There has been a lot of trial and error as the programs have grown, working with the data and evaluating what works best for the city.

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Kansas City, Missouri

Population: 488,943

Annual budget: $1.69 billion

Employees: 5,029

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The Office of Management and Budget attributed the project's ongoing success to KCMO's strategic planning processes, laid out in the citywide business plan. The citywide business plan is a year-round program used to determine how well the city is meeting its self-assigned goals. The budgeting process is one part of this plan. Incorporating online budget tools has brought a "big picture" context to the information in the Open Data and Balancing Act platforms, making it easier for citizens to interpret the data.

Organizations that provide mass amounts of data need to provide context for data to better serve the multiple audiences that will see the information. Understanding the audiences that use the online platforms is a key step in creating a successful online fiscal transparency program.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

The only way to provide context for your audience is to know who your audience is. The KCMO Budget Office identified two major users of the KC Open Data platforms, the media and special-interest groups. Although it took some time for the relationship to become established, the media now

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uses the KCMO open data platforms as a source of information about city activities, cutting the number of phone calls the city receives from news outlets and saving both groups a significant amount of time. The growing sense of activism in KCMO has prompted special interest groups to use the open data platform as well, prompting similar groups to build partnerships. The open data provides the groups with program resources and information that they can share with their stakeholders.

When the open budget data platform got started, most of the users were external. Fellow government officials were not using the information, although this appears to be changing. This may be because of the city's strategic plan, which requires departments to think critically about their programming. The open budget platform allows departments to look at their own programs' funding history and understand the trends within their departments and other departments in the city. Non-finance professionals and non-finance departments like the platform because it's accessible, and you don't need a lot of specialized financial knowledge to understand the information.

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Kansas City's Online Financial Transparency Sites

Open Data KC Platform: data.kcmo.org

Open Budget KC Platform: budget.kcmo.gov

Balancing Act Tool: kansas-city-mo.abalancingact.com

KCStat Dashboard: kcstat.kcmo.org

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Like many cities, Kansas City hasn't experienced a lot of general resident engagement with the online financial transparency platforms. "We focus a lot on developing these tools and developing the citywide processes, and we've reached our target audience in that regard. But what we are finding is that like in a lot of urban communities, there's still a pretty substantial digital divide, where we are

missing that grassroots neighborhood focus," said Debbie Chiu, Budget Operations Officer at KCMO. The lesson the Office of Management and Budget has learned is that the "post it and they will come" model doesn't work if you want to make a community-wide impact. So the finance department is working with the Center for Neighborhoods, homeowner groups, and other neighborhood organizations in Kansas City to help put "boots on the ground" to talk to people about the financial processes and the online tools the city has made available to gain a broader variety in local government finance participation.

REMEMBER THAT GOALS CHANGE

Kansas City's online financial transparency program doesn't look the same today as it did when it began. As the finance department has grown along with this initiative, its transparency goals have evolved beyond just providing data and tools to their stakeholders. Huizenga said, "The open checkbook and downloadable files are great, but they aren't always the most useful for the majority of people." The KCMO Finance Department wants to focus on individual needs and tailor its message, giving people a clear understanding of the data in front of them. They focus on giving users enough context to understand and use the information they're looking at, rather than just providing the data points and letting users sort them out. The city's goals for online fiscal transparency are also ever changing, as the community adapts new methodology from the best data platforms and from changing best practices.

CONCLUSIONS

Online fiscal transparency programs vary by government in terms of the method and type of data they present to their communities, and that is as it should be. All communities are different. However, some basic principles do apply to most programs. It all starts with attaining top-down support to ensure that the initiative will have the resources it needs to be effective and reduce the likelihood of the effort stalling out or losing momentum over time. When undertaking this kind of project, governments should also be careful about how much additional work they take on. Work within the resources you have so you can consistently provide high-quality information. Also, governments should make sure they understand the audience that will be using the tools they create, and factor that into the way the data are presented. You must first know your audience before you seek to expand it. Finally, a government's transparency goals are likely to evolve over time, as is its ability to achieve its goals. Governments need to work within the limitations of the organization's resources and adapt themselves to the needs of the community.

> The only way to create context for your audience is to know who your audience is. Kansas City identified two major users of the KC Open Data platforms, the media and special-interest groups.

MARK MACK is a manager in GFOA's Research and Consulting Center. Scott Huizenga, budget officer, Office of Management and Budget, Kansas City, Missouri, contributed to this article.

Montgomery County

Serious about Online Transparency since 1992

By Mark Mack

Montgomery County explains the elements that contributed to the success of its online financial transparency platforms.

Montgomery County, Maryland, has a lot of experience with online transparency, having gotten started back in 1992. (See the "Decades of Online Transparency" sidebar.) The county's latest strategy, spending Montgomery, was designed to better serve its residents, employees, and other partners. Spending Montgomery is housed within Data Montgomery, the county's centralized open data website. That platform provides interested users with a lot of information, and spending Montgomery is a guided view to complex financial information for stakeholders.

The finance department at Montgomery County attributes its success to the following:

- Having a leader to start the platform.
- Picking a platform that meets the county's needs and is cost effective.
- Standardizing and automating.
- Connecting to transparency beyond the finance office.
- Making the content usable for different kinds of users.
- Asking for feedback as you grow.

FIND A LEADER

Projects need a champion to help them succeed. For spending Montgomery, the Montgomery County Finance Department played that role. The department saw how valuable the platform could be, providing residents and local businesses with even more information than required and providing a better view of how the government spends public funds, including the programs the county invests in. In other words, the finance department saw the value of financial transparency.

The county appointed a dedicated leader to keep the project running smoothly while the platform was being built. This was the data service manager, who worked tirelessly to ensure that all participating parties were providing the data to the platform. Without a dedicated leader, a massive open data project can get lost in the weeds of everyday responsibilities. For many of the people involved, these open data projects are just one of many day-to-day tasks that need to be completed, so there must be a project leader to keep everyone on track, lest the entire project fall apart.

PICK THE RIGHT PLATFORM

At the beginning of this transparency initiative, county officials looked carefully at another implementation they hoped to emulate, but they realized that its scale and technology couldn't be reproduced and sustained in Montgomery County. They realized that they needed a different process, one that would be based on the rich data published on the county's open data portal and would feature a user interface that focused on the county's

defined user personas (based on the types of users who were most likely to use the tool).

STANDARDIZE AND AUTOMATE

The county had to face a fear of the unknown in developing the open data initiative. A crucial step in combating that fear was to standardize the methodology used to import data, which ensured consistency throughout the platform. This minimized the potential for human error — which is why the county wanted to automate the platform as much as possible. Spending Montgomery includes records that date back to the program's implementation in 2012, and to manually enter all that data into the program would have been quite an undertaking. With a highly automated system, the job of county employees is limited to (1) ensuring that all the data are accurate and (2) making sure that confidential information remains confidential.

> **Montgomery County, Maryland**
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> Population: 422,331
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> Annual Budget: $5.6 billion
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> Number of Employees: 4,127

COUNTY-WIDE TRANSPARENCY

The online fiscal transparency project in Montgomery County is unique because it started with a policy change on the county level, the 2012 Open Data Act. The idea originally came from the finance office. Elected officials pursued a platform of transparency, and county legislation was the result. This means the finance office online transparency initiative goes beyond the finance office itself; it is connected to a countywide transparency effort that is supported by elected officials.

Montgomery County worked to include different user personas when developing the platform, including residents, advocates, analysts, local businesses, the media, and county employees.

DIFFERENT USERS, DIFFERENT APPROACHES

County officials believe that it is their responsibility to provide answers when members of the community come to the open data platform with questions, but they do not want the data to lead users in a specific direction. The data needed to include context without bias, allowing users to formulate their own opinions on the information. That being said, Montgomery County worked to include different user personas when developing the platform, including residents, advocates, analysts, local businesses, the media, and county employees. The user personas provide these users — who have very different needs and levels of understanding — to visit the platform and find the data they need, along with answers to any questions they'd be likely to have. The platform is meant to be a guide to help answer questions, not a means of disseminating set ideas.

YOU NEED FEEDBACK

The county did not create its platform in a vacuum. While developing spending Montgomery, officials worked with residents, gathering and acting on their feedback. The county wanted to understand how the residents would use the data over time and learn how they would ask questions, making sure the information the county was providing would answer those questions and hit all the right notes. The county felt the responsibility to create and maintain a website that could accurately answer questions related to user's needs.

CONCLUSIONS

When Montgomery County was creating its online data platform, county officials wanted to ensure that it worked for county employees and all other users — and they took that ideal very

> **Decades of Online Transparency**
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> What were you doing online in 1992? Browsers and web server software were available in 1991, and by 1992 they were being used by a few universities. That was also the year Montgomery County, Maryland, started its e-Government site. In 2010 and 2012, the county Legislature enacted two bills, one requiring online disclosure for payments of more than $25,000, and the other — known as the Open Data Act — requiring the county to identify public data (e.g., spending data) and publish it on one central site. That central site was called data Montgomery (montgomerycountymd.gov/open), and openMontgomery (montgomerycountymd.gov/open) followed that.

Key Takeaways

- **Have a Leader.** Any major initiative will fail unless it has a dedicated leader to keep the project organized. Start your online financial transparency project by finding a government official who is willing to take on the responsibility of making sure all the appropriate steps are being taken.

- **Create a Transparency Policy.** A policy outlining the government's approach to online financial transparency can help elevate the project to the next level. That's because it engenders support from multiple facets of the organization and sets the expectations of the government's constituency and staff.

- **Ask for Feedback.** As you begin the online fiscal transparency processes, ask potential users what they want to know about the government's finances.

- **Don't Copy Everyone Else.** When designing your open data platform, it's a good idea to look to other communities for inspiration, but don't try to create a carbon copy of another government's dashboard. It isn't likely to work because each government is unique. Let the needs of your constituents be your guide.

seriously during its development. The 2012 Open Data Act made the County responsible for sharing data with its constituency and changing the way citizens interact with the county's financial data, but the county went several steps beyond this mandate. It made sure the site not only contained data, but also made that data truly useful for anyone using the spending Montgomery portal. ▐

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