

CROSS-SECTORAL GOVERNANCE: EXAMINING THE FLORIDA INTEGRATED NETWORK FOR DATA EXCHANGE AND RETRIEVAL (FINDER)

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Abstract

Complicated public problems have forced public agencies to establish partnerships with different organizations from public, private, and non-profit sectors. Law enforcement agencies have understood that it is not possible to cope with those issues alone anymore and that cooperation is needed because criminals and terrorists operate across bureaucratic and jurisdictional boundaries. In this context, information sharing is one of the most important components of this cooperation. For this purpose, the law enforcement agencies in the state of Florida and University of Central Florida (UCF) have engaged in a partnership known as Florida Integrated Network for Data Exchange and Retrieval (FINDER) to create a statewide data sharing system to combine fragmented and disconnected local databases. In this article, highly successful partnership between Florida law enforcement agencies and UCF was examined as an example of cross-sectoral partnership. The study results suggest that FINDER is a significant response to the historical problem of the lack of information sharing among law enforcement agencies. Interorganizational networks may facilitate development of social networks among staff from different agencies by increasing interactions. In addition, keeping the cost of network operation and membership low is important to build and expand the network. Furthermore, organizations should voluntarily participate in network without any government coercion. According to the study results, systematic effectiveness evaluation is essential to identify to what extent the system achieves its predetermined goals and produce outcomes. Finally, it is important to benefit from the dissemination of the experiences of FINDER across the country.

Keywords: Cross-sectoral partnership, information sharing, interorganizational networks, law enforcement, data exchange

Introduction

Contemporary public issues have made modern organizational environments more complex (Scott, 2001; Weick, 2001; Sahin and Matusitz, 2012). Therefore, “uncertainty also increases and the ratio of externally to internally induced changes also is increasing” (Kapucu, 2005, p. 36). According to Pfeffer and Salanic (1978), external factors such as social structure of resource dependence force organizations to build and participate in interorganizational networks. “Organizations create ties to manage uncertain environments and to satisfy their resource needs; consequently, they enter ties with other organizations that have resources and capabilities that can help them cope with these exogenous constraints” (Gulati & Garguillo, 1999 p. 1440). To overcome those complicated problems, public agencies seek to establish partnerships with different organizations from various sectors such as public, private, and non-profit.

There is no doubt that significant changes on crime types and criminal activities within last decade have led public safety agencies to dramatically change the way they fight these crimes. The agencies have understood that it is not possible to cope with this issue alone anymore and that cooperation is essential because criminals and terrorists continue to operate across bureaucratic and jurisdictional boundaries. In this sense, information sharing is considered as one of the most important components of this cooperation. For this purpose, the law enforcement agencies in the state of Florida and University of Central Florida (UCF) have engaged in a partnership known as Florida Integrated Network for Data Exchange and Retrieval (FINDER) to create a statewide data sharing system to combine fragmented and disconnected local databases (FINDER Information Guide, 2008).

In this study, highly successful partnership between Florida law enforcement agencies and UCF was examined as an example of cross-sectoral partnership. First, the problem was defined and the goals of the partnership were examined by addressing to the interests of the stakeholders. In the second part, the partnership structure which is primary focus of the paper was analyzed. Finally, in the conclusion part, lessons learned from the partnership and recommendations for future actions were discussed.

Goals of the Partnership

To be able to understand why information sharing is important to public safety, it is important to remember the Mohammad Atta case. He was

leader of the September 11 hijackers. Two months before the attacks, he was stopped by the Palm Beach County police for traffic violation and let go with a warning. But, the court in neighboring Broward County had issued an arrest warrant for him couple weeks earlier. However, the Palm Beach County police had no such system that they could check the records in the neighboring county (Jennifer Sumner, The Center for Law Enforcement Technology, Training, & Research, UCF, Personal communication, July 10, 2008).

As mentioned in the case, the problem is that there is no available and effective data sharing system across jurisdictional or bureaucratic boundaries, which can provide a link between law enforcement agencies in Florida. Each agency had its own database; however, these databases were localized, fragmented, and disconnected. Therefore, the agencies were unable to share their data that was essential for not only criminal investigations but also crime prevention efforts. The absence of such system made the agencies vulnerable to criminals operating across bureaucratic and jurisdictional boundaries.

To overcome this serious problem, in 2002, Orange County and Seminole County Sheriff's Offices initiated this partnership (FINDER) in which currently 141 law enforcement agencies in Florida and the UCF participate. The goals of the partnership are to establish a statewide infrastructure to provide connection among disparate databases and to provide all agencies to exchange their data effectively. In this partnership, the staff with IT development skill and the faculty or students with research skill are provided by the UCF.

Interests of the Stakeholders

Law enforcement agencies' interests in the partnership are: having an instant search capability on the databases of the law enforcement agencies throughout the Florida; saving investigative hours and avoiding time-consuming works such as phone calls and written request to obtain needed information from the other agency; retaining ownership and control over their databases and records; receiving full technical support and upgrades pertaining to FINDER's hardware and software; keeping the system's cost low (low membership fee and low-cost technical requirements); and overall, achieving improved crime reduction and investigation performance (McClure, Personal communication, July 2, 2008).

According to Joseph Giampapa, the director of technology transfer of the UCF, the interests of the UCF are: supporting and contributing to the community; providing the students to be involved in IT development process, practicing, and research activities; creating job opportunity for the students by enhancing relationships with the law enforcement agencies

throughout the state; and enhancing the reputation of the university at both state and national level (Personal communication, July 9, 2008).

Structure of the Partnership

By 2007, 141 law enforcement agency including county sheriff's offices and municipal police departments participate in FINDER, which means more than one-third of all law enforcement agencies in Florida engaged in the partnership. The network is continuously growing and the goal is to include all the agencies (FINDER Information Guide, 2008).

The UCF is an active participant in the project. By providing its empirical and technological expertise, researchers and technical staff at the UCF help to design, develop, and technically support the FINDER's system to link the disparate data management systems of the participating agencies.

The partnership has two governance components; Florida Law Enforcement Data Sharing Consortium and Center for Law Enforcement Technology, Training, and Research (LETTR).

The project is basically governed by *Florida Law Enforcement Data Sharing Consortium* in which all member agencies of the FINDER participate. The consortium guided by a Steering Committee, comprised of representatives from each agency. Each member agency has a voting seat on the Steering Committee that allows the agencies to make decisions pertaining to policy establishment, procedures, expansion efforts, and determining the development priorities of the system. The Consortium plays a key role in creating trust relationships and providing contributions from the agencies for the partnership goal (McClure, Personal communication, July 2, 2008).

The other governance component is *Center for Law Enforcement Technology, Training, and Research (LETTR)*. Until 2007 the technical operations were coordinated by the faculties and staff at the UCF Public Safety Technology Center. In 2007, because of the rapid growth of FINDER, LETTR, a non-profit organization was established by the UCF and the Consortium to consolidate resources, management, technology, and operations (Giampapa, Personal communication, July 9, 2008). LETTR has a board of directors comprised of representative from the UCF, the Consortium, Seminole and Orange County Sheriff's Offices, the Florida Attorney General's Office, and the UCF board of trustee (as chair of the board). The vision of LETTR is to enhance political, legal, and financial support to keep the low-cost information sharing system available to the agencies. The Consortium's representative on the board of LETTR who is also a member of the steering committee is the director of FINDER (FINDER Information Guide, 2008).

Even though it seems that LETTR' board has power over the Consortium, there is no hierarchical relationship between them in practice.

The steering committee of the Consortium represents the law enforcement agencies participating in the partnership and more focus on all operations and management of the project. However, the board of LETTR focuses on more general issues such as increasing financial and political support, dealing with legal issues, and advising. In this structure, the director of FINDER has significant function in governance of the partnership since he is not only the Consortium's member but also the member of LETTR's Board. Therefore, the Consortium has considerable effect on the management of FINDER (McClure, Personal communication, July 2, 2008).

There is an annual membership fee for the agencies. The amount of the annual financial contribution from the members is determined by the Consortium to insure that FINDER can be self-sustaining in the future (McClure, Personal communication, July 2, 2008). The annual agency contribution depends on their size that based on the number of sworn personnel. The annual membership fees range from \$10,000 for the agencies with 500 sworn personnel to \$2,500 for the agencies with between 1-99 sworn personnel, which is relatively low compared to other information sharing solution produced by private companies. Along with the member contributions, FINDER has received \$2.5 million as grant funding from external resources such as Justice Department and the Florida Legislature to improve and expand the project (Sumner, Personal communication, July 10, 2008).

Discussion on the Governance Structure of the Partnership

Governance structure of any network is very important. Participants must realize the importance of the rules governing their relationship with each others to be able to jointly make decisions since creating governance structure will allow them to solve the problem of collective action and reconcile the organizational self-interest and collective-interests in the network (Thomson & Perry & Miller, 2007). The partnership type of FINDER can be classified as information diffusion network since the main purpose is sharing information among interdependent organizations across bureaucratic boundaries (Provan and Milward, 2006; Sahin and Matusitz, 2012). When the law enforcement agencies are considered as parts of the partnership, it seems that the Consortium is a self-governance network since there is no administrative entity and all members participate in the network management. However, when we consider the partnership as a whole including the UCF side and the fact that the FINDER's director is a member of LETTR, LETTR is obviously network administrative organization (Provan and Milward, 2006) covering and governing the network as a whole.

FINDER can be considered as a successful partnership when we look at the success indicators such as network growth, ability to meet the user's

needs, and use of the system. The network continues to grow rapidly each year. According to a study (Scott, 2006), over 1,300 individual users made approximately 1.8 million queries in the FINDER between 2004 and 2006. In addition, according to the result of the survey in the study, 71% of the respondents reported that FINDER improved performance, and 82% of them reported that it improved efficiency (Scott, 2006). It is viewed as the national model for information sharing success by other states.

The effectiveness of FINDER can be attributed to the fact that it is well governed and has coordinating mechanism such as LETTR and the Consortium. Networks are more likely to be effective when networks and relationships among member organizations are well coordinated and governed. The role of mechanism that coordinates, supports network operations, and provides communication is important for managing conflict and high-performance network structure (Provan and Milward, 2000).

Rowley (1997) suggests that an organization's behavior in relation to network is affected by where its position is and how much power it has in the network. It can be said that the member agencies of FINDER are motivated to support and contribute to the partnership since each agency has the opportunity to participate in directing and managing the project (McClure, Personal communication, July 2, 2008).

Adequate funding is another requirement for successful network. According to Provan and Milward (2000), besides having stability and network coordination mechanism, networks need well funding and they suggest that a network is more likely to be effective when it is well and directly funded. Networks in a resource-rich environment are more likely to be effective. Based on this argument, the fact that FINDER receives considerable external funding (Sumner, Personal communication, July 10, 2008) mentioned above contributes to its effectiveness and stability.

There is no doubt that there has been relationship between law enforcement agencies in Florida for long time. In addition, there was existing relationship between law enforcement agencies and the UCF before FINDER. For example, the UCF engaged in several program regarding criminal justice and crime policy with the agencies in the past. When there is initial agreement on the problem definition and pre-existing relationships among network organizations, the networks can be effective (The Quest for Community Health, 2002).

Problems Facing the Partnership

Though FINDER's success is widely accepted and recognized by the great majority of the agencies, there are some problems that the project faces. It is still difficult to convince some law enforcement leaders to engage in the partnership since they are afraid of losing control of their records. In

addition, interagency cooperation on information sharing requires agencies, to some extent, to change the way they work; whereas, these changes are often considered as undesirable by the leaders. According to McClure (Personal communication, July 2, 2008), the director of FINDER, despite low cost of the project to the agencies, there are still some low size agencies experiencing some difficulties in engaging in the project since they have no adequate budget for establishing required system infrastructures or assigning any staff to enter the data into the system. Giampapa (Personal communication July 9, 2008), from the UCF Office of Research and Commercialization, states that despite the rapid increase in the number of user agencies and requests for FINDER, the technology and software development side of FINDER does not grow that fast, and that there is a shortage of technical staff. In addition, because of the legal barriers to keeping some kinds of records, the system is unable to include these data such as gun ownership records which are very valuable information for criminal investigations and crime prevention services (Giampapa, Personal communication, July 9, 2008).

Conclusion and Implications

It is obvious that FINDER is a significant response to the historical problem of the lack of information sharing among law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and that it is recognized as a model for not only local level but also national level information sharing systems in the future. Therefore, it is important to benefit from the experiences of FINDER.

Pre-existing relationship between the agencies facilitates both network development and effectiveness (The Quest for Community Health, 2002). Well-coordinated network structures with network administrative entity are more likely to be strong. In addition, it is easier for the well-coordinated networks to resolve possible conflicts among the members. The fact that each member agency participates to some degree in directing operations and management contributes to strength and stability of the network. Keeping the cost of network operation and membership low is important for building and expanding the network. Organizations should voluntarily participate in network without any government coercion. In the past, there were a lot of failed attempts at network building imposed by the authority. Gaining political support makes the network stronger and long lasting.

Interorganizational networks may facilitate development of social networks among staff from different agencies by increasing interactions. Since technical and management staff often communicate each other and participate in meetings, they perceive each other as the members of the same team (McClure, Personal communication, July 2, 2008). That is, beside the

formal network, an informal network emerges that can play a significant role in information sharing across organizational boundaries and effectiveness of the formal network.

First of all, it is essential for any network to have reliable and accurate performance evaluation to understand how effective the network is at the levels of agency, network, and community (Provan and Milward, 2001). FINDER should have systematic effectiveness evaluation to identify to what extent it achieves its predetermined goals and produce outcomes. Second, by using legislative support, FINDER should include some important records such as gun ownership data currently excluded in the data sharing because of the legal barriers. The agencies lacking adequate funding for the membership should be supported by creating external resources or allocating funding to them. No matter how large they are, the participation of all agencies is essential. Missing parts in the information sharing may prevent administrators and decision makers from seeing whole picture regarding public safety operations. Finally, the university side of FINDER should also be expanded by providing some other universities to be involved in the network. This expansion towards universities would strengthen and contribute to the technical development of FINDER.

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