Private Cloud of Data Helps Utah Cities Find Inefficiencies

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Cities are always looking for ways to operate more efficiently. Sometimes learning from a community of similar size and characteristics — an “apples-to-apples” comparison — helps public employees identify strengths and weaknesses.

That’s the idea behind Utah City Data, a benchmarking project that helps participating cities and towns derive intelligence from a private cloud of city-by-city government data. In November, the project launched a new online database — accessible only to participants — with the hope that it will take the project to the next level.

Data such as demographics, property taxes, tax revenue and tax revenue per capita is collected and archived in the database. Registered users can browse by cluster, which is a group of similar cities; by county; or can look up a particular city.

Originally launched in 2007, Utah City Data was created in a collaborative effort by the Utah City Management Association, Utah League of Cities and Towns, University of Utah’s Center for Public Policy and Administration, and Brigham Young University’s Romney Institute of Public Management. Starting out with 29 cities, the project has expanded over the last three years to more than 40 cities, according to the Utah League of Cities and Towns.

The universities involved with the project help collect the data through public sources and through the online database by sending surveys to the different cities and towns that have joined the project. This process is more efficient than the process they used before, which included sending spreadsheets to the cities, said Sara McCormick, a research associate for the University of Utah. The new process works better because it gives cities the opportunity to fill out information at their convenience since they’re able to log on to the database when it’s convenient.

“Members can go in and fill in the information, can log out, and get back in and fill in the rest of the information,” she said. “They don’t have to submit data all at once.”

Neil Abercrombie, a public finance and policy analyst for the Utah League of Cities and Towns, said before the project launched three years ago, cities often had difficulty collecting data about other cities.

“City managers talked about putting together something more comprehensive, so they came to the Utah League of Cities and Towns,” Abercrombie said. “We thought the project would improve the service delivery and the management of our communities, so we helped bring together a coalition.”

Abercrombie said twice a year the Utah City Management Association holds conferences where the Utah League of Cities and Towns presents data from the benchmarking project to showcase best practices. Because the data collection is for comparative research purposes, cities learn about what other cities are doing to run more efficiently.

“One city said they did research on how to make their park better and through surveys learned that what was most important to citizens was if the trash had been emptied and if the bathrooms were clean,” Abercrombie said. “So they presented their results to other city managers.”

Abercrombie said there’s no emphasis on ranking the cities and the main purpose is to compare cities so they can learn how to improve. When cities join Utah City Data, they agree that they’re not at liberty to discuss the inefficiencies that are identified in other cities.
Cities pay a $500 flat rate annually to access the database, which includes data from all the participating cities. City managers or other authorized city personnel are given a username and password to the database, which is a Microsoft Open Database Connectivity interface.