

How SAP and cities are boosting innovation through open data

Listening to a couple of coders gush over the virtues of gamification, location-based mobile services and open data standards, I might have mistaken the techies for sneaker-wearing pitchmen at a Silicon Valley hackathon.

But this was midtown Manhattan. Instead of B-school dropouts, the geeks in question were actually silver-haired civil servants in charge of the IT operations for Boston and Edmonton. Though centuries old, each of the cities is racing towards decidedly cutting-edge goals of opening up access to municipal data for their residents and businesses to use and commercialize.

“Successful cities of the future aren’t necessarily the most efficient. It’s about engagement and citizen empowerment,” said Bill Oates, chief information officer for the City of Boston. “Our innovation is on people, to help constituents connect with the city.”

The CIOs were brought together by SAP to mark the U.S. launch of the software giant’s Urban Matters program, which aims to help municipal governments “deliver better-run cities” by opening up data streams for citizens and business to tap into.

As this software space matures, big companies also are exploring opportunities to integrate city data feeds into current and future services.

GM is grooming its OnStar unit to become the software hub for transportation services such as RelayRides’ peer-to-peer car sharing service. The automaker recently issued protocols that will let third-party developers integrate the data beginning to flow from cities -- such as road construction information, or parking data -- into future OnStar services.

In the world of smart buildings, Johnson Controls is likewise eyeing the opportunities emerging by tapping into huge, public pools of data on the performance of buildings in Philadelphia, New York, San Francisco, Washington D.C. and other cities.

Back in Boston, SAP technology is powering the city’s Boston About Results website and accompanying Citizen Insights iPhone app. Citizen Insights collects, analyzes and shares performance measures across scores of city departments from tree planting requests to fire response times.

By digitizing and opening up their data flows, most cities are trying to evolve into “better versions of themselves” rather than presume to compete with Silicon Valley, said Bruce Katz, vice president and director of the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution.

Boston and Edmonton are pushing to lead a growing contest among cities aiming to boost their competitiveness by opening access to city data streams. Fighting to transform decades-old bureaucratic processes that tended to lock up key city information -- such as property records or tax rolls -- in hard-to-access formats, the goal is first to digitize as much information as possible.