

Success Factors and Pitfalls of Strategic Planning Efforts

The intended purpose of this table was to compile a set of success factors and pitfalls in one place, as a handy reference for discussion and consensus-building as part of the planning process.

Success Factors	Pitfalls	Observations
Make sure the strategic goals are accepted and agreed upon	Dissension over goals	The goal of supporting implementation of statewide spatial data infrastructures (SSDI) is taken as a given. However, it will not serve to motivate the states into action by itself, and it is clearly not embraced on its own merit. Why will an SSDI be good for the states? Some states already have established clear goals and objectives and are working with local communities to establish a geospatial fabric. What is the rationale for these states to refocus resources, pursue grant money and make other changes to bring them in line with the national standards? Consensus building does not require that 100% of the participants agree on all goals. They only have to be willing to support the whole “package” because they see value for their individual reasons.
Make sure the strategic goals are feasible to implement and consistent with expectations	Unrealistic goals and expectations	A challenging goal can be a good thing, as long as it is feasible to achieve it, and it is supported with adequate resources to implement. Setting unrealistically high expectations, without regard to resources and level of commitment, will reduce your chances for success. Success tends to “breed” further success while early failures can cause the participants to lose interest in the planning process. Make sure some of the goals can be achieved by the actions of the participants alone and that long range timelines are clearly understood.
Incentives that will stimulate a commitment to strategic goals	Lack of motivation to implement an “unfunded mandate”	What’s the stimulus required for your stakeholders to commit to this effort? When it comes to the Federal Government wanting the NSDI to be implemented, with the states as primary agents, (or the states wanting local government buy-in) what’s the quid pro quo? What other incentives are there apart from Federal grant money linked to compliance? For example, what can the states themselves do to create incentives for the participants? Look at all possible benefits such as statewide data contracting to get “scale of economy” savings for individual local governments, or statewide data distribution centers that may free up staff time for local participants. Quantify every incentive to ensure that their true values are understood.

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Get top-down support	Ignore top-down support	Win top-down support by clearly articulating and presenting the purpose and benefits of the plan, and seek commitments. Do not assume that plans will be blessed because of noble initiative. What is the value to the organization and the organization’s constituents, including state and local governments? What does the Governor of a state know or care about an SSDI, and why? How about the CIO? This list of benefits may need to be different depending on who the reader is -- the Governor will have a different perspective than the CIO.
Get grassroots support	Ignore grassroots support	Win grassroots support through broad participation and open discussion. An enumerated list of clear and tangible benefits is needed for grassroots entities, too. Understand the burdens and new responsibilities that might fall upon grassroots performers, and identify resources to meet their needs. Unfunded, unsupported mandates create tension, confusion, and rejection. The states have a particularly challenging and important coordination role with regard to local governments (e.g., counties, cities, towns).
Recognize the need for change	Ignore the need for change	If an organization is not configured (or funded) to achieve the desired goal, then change is needed. Change might be needed on multiple fronts, including organizational culture, political environment, procurement processes, and technical practices. The term “transformation” is sometimes used as a synonym for change in an organizational context. While resistance to change is fundamental to many organizations, particularly bureaucratic ones, the key to success is often to reconfigure roles and relationships to organize around the new objective. Implementing a SSDI requires a mobilization of resources to build a new “value chain” for geospatial data creation and aggregation, including suppliers, partners, stakeholders and customers. What does the current “value chain” for geospatial data look like, and how does it need to change? Is it the same in all cases – for example, with regard to the Nunn-Lugar-Domenici Act 133 Cities data gathering, what is the role of the state? An integrated perspective of the enterprise is needed, and in terms of a SSDI, what is the enterprise?

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Define the project boundaries	Shoot for infinity	What is in, and what is out? Both elements need to be articulated to create realistic plans that can be financed and implemented. While there is always an element of emerging objectives that only evolve through learning and experience, the targeted objectives should be deliberately stated.
Choose appropriate milestones and a timeline	Choose a non-specific “whatever” attitude and rely on random chance	For there to be both a sense of mission and a sense of accomplishment, milestones and timeframes should be articulated and not left totally open-ended. For some operational matters, timing needs to be tied to operating realities, such as the yearly budget cycle, or “leaf-on/leaf-off” windows of opportunity. While some progress might actually be due to inadvertent factors, this is not sufficient reason to ignore milestones and timelines for measuring progress. Other performance measurements are often appropriate, and need to be elaborated. Who performs this assessment, and at what points in the timeline, should they be determined. Over the course of any project, actual progress may reasonably vary from the plan. There is even some merit in a “not-too-precisely-defined” vision of direction, to take advantage of emerging assets and ideas that are not apparent when getting underway. Phased implementation with realistic annual targets is a practical approach. Progress and success in achieving goals must be tracked and reported to the entire community to maintain their interest in the planning process.
Evaluate alternatives along the way	Ignore alternatives along the way	Things happen after a plan is underway that might make eminently good sense to consider, and might even warrant a change in course. Examples might include technological breakthroughs, new funding sources, or new constituents.
Consider “unbundling” subprojects at the action-level of the business plan	Keep all of the eggs in one basket	A good example of unbundling is represented by the “Imagery for the Nation” initiative. As this gains traction, focused business plans to implement the program make sense. Other examples might include cadastral data or any of the “framework layers.” Breaking down strategic goals into rational steps so that they can be implemented is the purpose of business planning.

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Be determined to create and maximize value	Be determined to maximize funding	The easy answer to implementing a SSDI is to say “send more money to the states or locals.” While this will help, it could also result in the squandering of scarce resources unless there is a serious intent and effort to truly create value in delivering NSDI or SSDI components. What is the perceived level of contribution to society (public value) associated with implementing the NSDI or SSDI? What is the cost of realignment against the benefit?
Concentrate resources on key goals	Dilute resources across all goals	Trying to achieve too much with too little can lead to failure. Seek sustainable funding sources, above and beyond incentives.
Understand previous efforts	Ignore previous efforts	Analyze past successes and failures, but avoid “paralysis from analysis.” Also, avoid merely copying past efforts, and promote strategies that use lessons-learned as leverage.
Creativity and imagination	Same-old-same-old	Creative approaches that synthesize past experiences with new ideas are needed for strategic change. This is especially true when traditional roles and responsibilities need to be changed.
Promote a process, and not just a destination	Too fixed on the destination	Realization of a successful program heavily depends on an inclusive process, where implementation details may vary over time, and not necessarily be fixable at the start of the program.
Energy and willingness to act	Ho-hum	Enthusiasm can be contagious. So can negativity. Most long-term efforts will have ups and downs, but maintaining a suitable level of energy and willingness to act will help overcome the doldrums and lack of progress.