Cross-departmental collaboration in one-stop service center for smart governance in China: Factors, strategies and effectiveness

Xinping Liu, Lei Zheng

Business School, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, 516 Jungong Rd., Shanghai 200093, China
School of International Relations and Public Affairs, Lab for Digital and Mobile Governance, Fudan University, 220 Handan Rd., Shanghai 200433, China

Abstract
Cross-departmental collaboration is considered a critical means for government to solve complex public issues. By studying a one-stop service center in China, this paper examines the influencing factors, strategies and effectiveness of government cross-departmental collaboration. The study finds that, besides variables that have been found in existing studies, the effectiveness of cross-departmental collaboration in China is also affected by administrative reform and personal relations among officials and staff.

© 2015 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: One-stop service center, Cross-departmental collaboration, Public service, Factor, Strategy, Effectiveness

1. Introduction
Interaction among organizations is commonly observed in solving public issues such as transportation, housing and environmental protection. As governments around the world are trying their best to improve efficiency and effectiveness, different departments have no better choice but to work together to deal with public issues. To promote boundary-spanning management, government officials need to find a way to collaborate across departments. However, every department has its own interests which cannot be easily balanced and make collaboration unattainable.

These policy issues related to networks challenge existing patterns of organization and management, and require cross-organizational cooperation (Alexer, 1993; Clarke & Stewart, 1997). Meanwhile, the dispersed knowledge and resources, first- and second-order effects, and intergovernmental overlays require managers to engage other governments or organizations (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003). Moreover, debates from both academia and public management practitioners are currently emphasizing the benefits of collaboration or inter-agency partnerships as a means of achieving public policy goals (Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998).

Over the past decades, researchers have conducted many studies on cross-departmental collaboration, but very few in-depth empirical studies have been conducted in the Chinese context, which is very unique. Contextualization has proved to be an important stage in digital government revolution (Janowski, 2015). Transplanting the practice of one country to another (usually from developed countries to developing ones) without serious consideration of the cultural, political, economic, and social differences of the two countries can be risky (Zheng, Yang, Fardo, & Jiang, 2009). Therefore, this paper tries to apply theories and studies on the topic to a different context by conducting a Chinese case study on cross-departmental collaboration process. This paper could have significant practical and theoretical value in understanding cross-departmental collaboration in China, as well as extending the current knowledge about government operations.

The research questions the paper wants to answer are as follows. What are the external and internal factors that could influence cross-departmental collaboration in China? What strategies have been adopted by the Chinese government, faced with those factors, to promote cross-departmental collaboration? Are cross-departmental collaboration in China effective?

The paper first presents a literature review and an analytical framework built upon the revised related work in Section 2, followed by a briefing of research design and methodology in Section 3. Section 4 is the main analytical section that studies the case of the one-stop service center in China.
Cross-departmental collaboration in government has been studied for several decades, especially by western researchers (Alexer, 1993; Hoffman, Stearns, & Shrader, 1990; Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998; Sanchez, 2012; Weiss, 1987; Yang, Zheng, & Pardo, 2012). Existing literature provides insights on motivations for collaboration, factors that could promote or prohibit collaboration processes and collaboration strategies. However, very few in-depth empirical studies are found in the Chinese context.

2. Literature review and analytical framework

Cross-departmental collaboration in government could promote or prohibit collaboration processes and collaboration strategies and conclusions for governance.

2.1. What is cross-departmental collaboration?

In the literature on organizational theory, collaboration, together with inter-organizational relations, interagency coordination, network governance, inter-sectoral cooperation and strategic alliances of organizations, is used to describe various joint activities across boundaries, although there is little agreement on the meaning of these terms (Alexander, 1995). Collaboration means taking part in a voluntary inter-organizational relationship that sets forth the responsibilities and benefits of participation (Hill & Lynn, 2003). Government agencies employ collaboration to share public authorities, information and resources, to enhance capabilities, or to solve large-scale problems by making and implementing public policies together.

Cross-departmental collaboration refers to “any joint activity by two or more agencies that is intended to increase public value by their working together rather than separately” (Bardach, 1998). It takes different forms, depending on whether they are mandated by law, based on a formal agreement, or voluntary (Hall, Clark, Giordano, Johnson, & Roekel, 1977). Also, the collaboration could be different due to different management styles, different cultures, and different operating modes of participating organizations (Ackermann, Franco, Gallupe, & Parent, 2005).

2.2. Motivations for cross-departmental collaboration

A need for collaboration arises as a result of the increasing interconnectedness between government agencies. One researcher reviews existing theories related to collaboration and finds out that the exchange theory, contingency theory, organizational ecology, and transaction-cost theory have provided an answer for collaboration, and argues that organizations work together to survive (Alexander, 1995). Collaboration occurs as organizations try to adapt to their environment or maximize their goal attainment. Organizations collaborate with other organizations to respond to challenges posed by those inter-organizational relationship that sets forth the responsibilities and benefits of participation (Gargiulo, 1999).

Existing literature extends the scope of collaboration (Axelsson & Axelsson, 2006). It takes different forms, depending on whether they are mandated by law, based on a formal agreement, or voluntary (Hill, Clark, Giordano, Johnson, & Roekel, 1977). Also, the collaboration could be different due to different management styles, different cultures, and different operating modes of participating organizations (Ackermann, Franco, Gallupe, & Parent, 2005).

2.3. Influencing factors for collaboration

Factors in both external environment and internal organizations could influence collaboration initiatives through the whole process. The paper categorizes these factors into two dimensions: external factors (political, economic and social) and internal factors (organizational arrangements, networks and resources).

2.3.1. External factors: political, economic, and social

Great environmental uncertainty promotes organizational administrators to seek out inter-organizational partners whose executives have similar backgrounds to theirs (Galaskiewicz, 1985; Galaskiewicz & Shatin, 1981). They expect to maximize the benefits from these network structures (Keast et al., 2004). Existing literature finds that the technological, sociological, ideological and political contexts could influence the whole collaboration process (Dawes, 1996; Gil-García & Pardo, 2005; Gil-Garcia et al., 2007; Keast et al., 2004; Pardo, Gil-García, & Burke, 2009; Yang & Maxwell, 2011; Yang et al., 2012; Zhang & Dawes, 2006; Zheng et al., 2009).

2.3.2. Internal factors: organizational arrangements, networks, and resources

Axelsson et al. mentioned that most of the difficulties are structural barriers, which are related to the existence of different administrative boundaries; different laws, rules and regulations; different budgets and financial streams; different information systems and databases. There are also some barriers related to organizational cultures, including different value and interests, and differences in the commitment of individuals and the organizations involved (Axelsson & Axelsson, 2006). Public power, authority and working habits would to some extent put some pressure on the development of collaborative initiatives (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001; Weiss, 1987). Organizations consider cross-departmental collaboration as a critical enabler for enhancing organizational effectiveness and efficiency while better strategic decisions and problem solving can be achieved with aggregated information and knowledge (Dawes, Gharawi, & Burke, 2012; Drucker, Dyson, Handy, Saffo, & Senge, 1997; Kim & Lee, 2006). It is also the implicit or explicit goal for most social policymakers to improve public effectiveness and efficiency in service delivery (Bardach, 1998; Hall et al., 1977). Collaboration could lead to significant cost savings and data reuse without duplicated data collections (Dawes, 1996; Gil-García & Pardo, 2005; Gil-García, Pardo, & Burke, 2007; Zhang & Dawes, 2006).

Wicked issues require new ways of working and thinking beyond the traditional approaches that have been found to be inadequate and inappropriate (Clarke & Stewart, 1997; Williams, 2002). Therefore, as a result of the inability of more traditional, hierarchical arrangements such as departmental programs, new types of collaborative efforts such as networks and network structures have emerged to deal with complex social problems (Keast, Mandell, Brown, & Woolcock, 2004; Williams, 2002). During the last two decades, there has been an increasing specialization and professionalization of roles that has led to an increasing functional and structural differentiation of organizations. The involvement of different sectors and the willingness to collaborate has extended the scope of collaboration (Axelsson & Axelsson, 2006).

Please cite this article as: Liu, X., & Zheng, L., Cross-departmental collaboration in one-stop service center for smart governance in China: Factors, strategies and effectiveness, Government Information Quarterly (2015), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2015.12.001
The creation of inter-organizational alliances in multiple contexts (e.g. coordinating councils and interagency teams) and at multiple levels (e.g. leader and direct care provider levels) may be a promising venue for facilitating inter-organizational exchanges to promote service delivery integration and improve inter-organizational collaboration (Foster-Fishman, Salem, Allen, & Fahrbach, 2001). However, these alliances also have difficulty with recruiting critical stakeholders, maintaining active member involvement, promoting a collaborative work culture, and achieving collaborative outcomes; in other words, these could be transferred to challenges for inter-organizational collaboration development (Foster-Fishman et al., 2001). During collaboration, each agency seeks to preserve its autonomy and independence, because their organizational routines are often difficult to synchronize, and their goals and the goals of different agencies often overlap (Weiss, 1987).

According to Agranoff & McGuire’s study, trust, a shared belief or common purpose, mutual dependency, leadership and guidance ability within self-managing systems are main cohesion factors in networks (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001; Gulati & Gargiulo, 1999; Zheng et al., 2009). Besides those above-mentioned four factors, initial dispositions toward cooperation and collaboration, issues and incentives, and the number and variety of groups shape cross-departmental collaboration (Faerman, McCaffrey, & Slyke, 2001). However, Axelrod also argues that friendship and trust are not necessary elements for collaboration to occur, and the time factor is more important (Axelrod, 1984). Communications and exchange of loyalties among political executives are essential in cross-departmental collaboration. However, if it doesn’t work well, lower-level officials could become confused about what the most important decisions are and who makes them. At worst, one uncoordinated appointee undercut another and gives agencypropic opponents ample opportunity to subvert leadership by shopping for someone to obey (Heclo, 1977). Furthermore, funding is another factor for practitioners (Rogers & Whetten, 1982).

2.3.3. Summary of influencing factors
As a summary, the key factors identified above are shown in Table 1.

2.4. Strategies for collaboration

Cross-departmental collaboration could be facilitated by various strategies. Overall, collaboration initiatives range from strategic alliances to joint ventures. Strategies vary for different types of collaborations. Some collaborative efforts focus on system changes, such as altering the existing structure, creating new linkages, and decreasing service fragmentation; while others focus on service change, such as increasing client access to services or providing more holistic treatment (Selden, Sowa, & Sandfort, 2006). Also, collaboration could be developed by political integration, social learning, adaptability, nation building, common purpose and trust (Gray, Jenkins, Leeuw, & Mayne, 2003).

2.5. Conceptual framework

Cross-departmental collaboration is influenced by external factors and internal organizational and network arrangements. These factors affect network effectiveness through a particular strategy, which forms the operational structure (Veliyath & Srinivasan, 1995). Veliyath & Srinivasan develop a strategic co-alignment framework (see Fig. 1) to explain the relations between influencing factors and organizational effectiveness. Strategic co-alignment involves a configuration comprising the external environment, internal organizational arrangements and organizational effectiveness. These elements are constrained, quasi-deterministic and multi-dimensional (Veliyath & Srinivasan, 1995).

Table 1 Key factors that influence cross-departmental collaboration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External factors</td>
<td>Political, economic, social</td>
<td>• Political contexts (Keast et al., 2004; Agranoff, 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Avoiding uncertainty (Galaskiewicz, 1985; Galaskiewicz &amp; Shatin, 1981)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Economic contexts (Keast et al., 2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Environmental complexity (Axelsson &amp; Axelson, 2006; Galaskiewicz &amp; Shatin, 1981)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Technological, sociological, and ideological factors (Dawes, 1996; Gil-Garcia &amp; Pardo, 2005; Yang &amp; Maxwell, 2011; Yang et al., 2012; Zheng et al., 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal factors</td>
<td>Organizational arrangement</td>
<td>• Government hierarchies (Christensen &amp; Lægreid, 2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Administrative and direct service linkage (Rogers &amp; Whetten, 1982)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Authority and fragmentation in political structures (Axelsson &amp; Axelson, 2006; Gulati &amp; Gargiulo, 1999; Keast et al., 2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Organizational and working culture (Gulati &amp; Gargiulo, 1999; Mayne &amp; Rieper, 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Boundaries between agencies (Yang et al., 2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Autonomy and independence (Weiss, 1987)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Leadership (Agranoff &amp; McGuire, 2001; Faerman et al., 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networks</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Creation of inter-organizational alliances (Foster-Fishman et al., 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Guidance ability within self-managing system (Agranoff &amp; McGuire, 2001; Axelrod, 1984; Gulati &amp; Gargiulo, 1999; Pardo et al., 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Number and variety of groups (Faerman et al., 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Mutual dependency on resources and information (Agranoff &amp; McGuire, 2001; Gulati &amp; Gargiulo, 1999; Pardo et al., 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Friendship (Axelrod, 1984)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Trust (Agranoff &amp; McGuire, 2001; Axelrod, 1984; Christensen &amp; Lægreid, 2008; Klijn, 2007; Perri, Leat, Seltzer, &amp; Stoker, 2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• A shared belief or common or collaborative purpose or outcomes (Agranoff &amp; McGuire, 2001; Faerman et al., 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Communications and exchange of loyalties among executives (Heclo, 1977)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Funding (Gans &amp; Horton, 1975; Rogers &amp; Whetten, 1982)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time (Axelrod, 1984)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of existing studies on cross-departmental collaboration were conducted outside China and may not be applicable to the Chinese context. Their findings may need to be adapted to local norms and values to become valid and generalizable. Based on Veliyath &
Srinivasan’s framework and findings in existing studies, this paper studies external profiles and factors, internal orientation and strategies, and organizational effectiveness of cross-departmental collaboration in the Chinese context by documenting the findings of a case study conducted in Xintai, China.

3. Research design and methods

Case study method employs an inductive approach to examine the nature of a phenomenon. The case study design is employed to answer how and why questions, and it involves detailed, rich and intensive analysis of a case or phenomena, concerned with complexity and particular nature of the case in question (Yin, 2003). Therefore, the case study method is adopted in this study to examine the nature of cross-departmental collaboration in the Chinese context.

3.1. Case selection

A case is chosen either because it is critical, unique, revelatory, or exemplifying in that it will provide a suitable context for the research questions to be answered and allow the researcher to examine key social processes (Yin, 2003). This paper selected Xintai City’s Administrative Service Center (ASC) as a case for the study. Xintai is a Chinese county-level city located in Shandong Province of East China. It was chosen for two reasons. One is that grass-root government is the main deliverer of public services in China. The other reason is that Xintai City has a relatively long history of cross-departmental collaboration practice and has developed quite mature collaborative mechanisms.

Founded in 2003, Xintai ASC is an institution directly led and managed by the Xintai government. With the development of information and communications technologies (ICT), the Xintai government explores its path of developing e-government and builds ASC into a one-stop service center. Various government agencies send staff to ASC and provide services to the public in the same location in order to deliver public services more efficiently and effectively.

3.2. Data collection

Data were collected from in-depth interviews and relevant government documents. In-depth interviews were conducted with officials in the Xintai government who were involved in collaborations in ASC. A snowballing method was adopted to identify and select individuals for interviews based on their role and participation in this program. Interviewees consisted of public sector officials and staff from various government agencies in Xintai City, leading officials and staff of ASC, and officials from the provincial government who are in charge of this program. A total of 26 individuals from 15 agencies were interviewed. A semi-structured questionnaire was developed and adopted during the interviews to examine the process, factors, strategies and effectiveness of cross-departmental collaboration in ASC. Government documents reviewed in this study included yearly government reports, statistical records, official ASC documents and ASC’s management records.

3.3. Data analysis

Audio records were converted into transcripts which were then coded according to the coding schema developed by the two researchers with a qualitative and inductive approach. Data were coded by one researcher first and then double-checked by the other researcher to ensure the accuracy and quality of coding. Whenever there were conflicts in coding, the two researchers discussed the discrepancies to determine the final codes. Atlas.ti software was used to support the process of coding.

4. Findings

This section examines factors that influence cross-departmental collaboration within the Chinese context. The study discovered that most factors found in existing studies also exist in the Chinese context, and it also discovered unique new factors.

4.1. External profiles and factors

External factors refer to the political, economic, and social factors which form the main context of cross-departmental collaboration. Considering these factors, organization leaders could avoid risks and improve organizational performance.

4.1.1. Requirements for better service

According to the interviewees, before service procedures were integrated at ASC, citizens had to fill up their information and submit required materials to each department for processing. In this service model, each agency worked separately and their processes were isolated. Citizens or companies needed to go back and forth among different agencies and submit forms repeatedly. For regular services or approval processes, usually more than one department were involved in collaboration. During the interviews, an official from ASC mentioned that, if people applied for permission for building a house, they needed to apply to departments such as the Land and Resources Agency, the City Planning Agency, the Construction Agency and the Civil Administration Agency one after another, and this process may take quite a long time to complete. However, in ASC, these departments now could work together and dramatically improve efficiency. According to government reports, Xintai City is currently going through rapid urbanization process, and many issues require different departments to collaborate. Citizens urge the government to provide services efficiently and effectively.

4.1.2. Needs for avoiding uncertainty

Uncertainty refers to inherent instability due to environmental complexity and dynamism that may prevent individuals in organizations from developing stable assessments of the environment itself. ASC provides government agencies with a platform to work together. By working in the same coherent process, these agencies could improve cross-departmental collaboration and double-check each other’s work to avoid uncertainty and reduce potential risks. In particular, emergency response constitutes a rationale for government agencies to collaborate. Xintai is widely known for its high-risk coal mining industry. On Aug. 17th, 2007, when a mine accident happened in Xintai, coal mine safety supervision agency collaborated with other departments including the Commission for Discipline Inspection, Industry and Commerce Administration Agency to respond to the emergence timely and effectively.

4.1.3. Adoption of new ICTs

The development of ASC has been greatly driven by the employment of new ICTs and software applications. With the support of new ICTs, ASC has developed new information system and improved efficiency. Furthermore, with the penetration of Internet, more citizens, even those from the countryside, now have access to government information through the Internet.

4.1.4. Administrative reform

The top-down administrative reform was found to be a political factor facilitating the collaboration process. In the year of 2008, the central government of China started a “Super-department Reform” (Da Bu Zhi Gai Ge), which intended to merge several small and isolated government departments into one integrated super-department. This institutional reform promotes local initiatives based on horizontal integration among government agencies. In addition, officials from Xintai reported that the administrative reform in which counties are
now supervised directly by provincial governments (Sheng Guan Xian) rather than by city governments could also improve the financial situation and autonomy of counties and improve the collaboration among agencies at county level.

4.2. Internal orientations and strategies

Internal orientations, such as political leadership, institutional arrangements, managerial rules, and efforts for collaboration could affect the process of cross-departmental collaboration.

4.2.1. Political leadership support and resource allocation

As ASC is considered as a platform for improving Xintai’s administrative performance, the political support and sufficient funding from the Xintai government makes the implementation of the ASC project possible and smooth. In China’s political and organizational culture, leading officials can convene authorities and resources for cross-departmental collaboration to sustain collaboration efforts. Interviewees mentioned that the successful development of ASC in Xintai and the implementation of standardized administrative service are closely related to the support from the leading officials of Xintai City government. As a result, disagreements among different agencies were solved smoothly, and necessary funds were allocated in a timely way.

4.2.2. Establishing institutional arrangement

ASC in Xintai is established as a city-level institution, led and managed directly by the city government. Having considered a number of alternatives related to which department ASC should report to, the city government finally decided to choose the City Commission for Discipline. The decision was made mainly because the City Commission for Discipline, especially the Office of Supervision and the Office of Administrative Evaluation under it, has the authority to evaluate each agency’s performance and dismiss leaders of administrative departments if they are ranked the last three for three consecutive years in the evaluation. The arrangement gives ASC enough authority and power to implement the project.

4.2.3. Moderating conflicts between ASC and participating agencies

During the initial period, potential conflicts of interests between ASC and participating agencies were demonstrated at three levels. At the leadership level, some agencies’ heads had the concern that their power was “taken over” by ASC. At the department level, when their business was first moved to ASC, agencies worried that their agencies were going to be removed or dismissed. At the staff level, while working at ASC, the staff felt that their workload and working pressure increased dramatically because they had to coordinate with their home agencies and interact with other agencies at the same time.

ASC mainly took the following measures to conciliate potential conflicts between ASC and each agency. First of all, with the political support from the city government, they communicated with heads of agencies to convince them that their authorities won’t be affected by just moving their service delivery site to ASC and gave incentives to those heads who were willing to participate. Secondly, they provide education and training to the leading officials and staff at the participating agencies. Thirdly, they regularly inform agencies of their staff’s performance at ASC and keep them updated with the latest management requirements of ASC. As a result, participating agencies and staff began to accept and adapt to the new service model gradually.

During the interview, both the former and incumbent directors of ASC showed great enthusiasm and commitment to their work. Also, many interviewees from participating agencies mentioned that the managers of ASC took care of them very well and even accommodate them over their difficulties and concerns in personal life. As a result, staff from participating agencies working at ASC are motivated and encouraged to work hard.

4.2.4. Coordinating among agencies

The study found that ASC also took measures to improve formal and informal coordination and interaction among participating agencies. For important issues, ASC held meetings of coordination to inform every relevant agency of what they are supposed to do. The managers of ASC played an important role in the process of coordination by acting as system controllers, mediators as well as process managers. Their efforts include facilitating agreement among various stakeholders and selecting other actors to join the collaboration. A former head of ASC said during the interview: “...We have to hold meetings with all relevant agencies, do some research and solve every single problem. Success requires coordination”. According to one department director: “coordination is needed when there are problems. Since ASC has a compelling power, it is easier for them to coordinate. Coordination work relies heavily on the ASC.”

Besides the formal working relationship, informal coordination and interaction between horizontal agencies was also improved. Seeking, building and utilizing guanxi (personal relationship) is a major task for many leading officials, as many problems can be solved through guanxi in China. Therefore, guanxi is found to be an important factor in this case. Informal communication plays a critical role during the whole collaboration process in building trust and facilitating the implementation of the project. When ASC assembled agencies to work together in the same center, it also, unexpectedly, improved the interaction among agencies’ leaders and staff.

When heads of different departments have better personal relationship, collaboration among them becomes much easier. The positive relationship among staff from different agencies also promotes cross-departmental collaboration. However, on the other hand, some interviewees also expressed a concern that with improved personal relationship, the cross-check surveillance among agencies might be weakened.

4.2.5. Setting managerial rules and standards

The Xintai government issued more than twenty rules and regulations, such as the Management Rules of ASC, and the Regulations for Responsibilities of Administrative Approval to regulate and guide business at ASC. Moreover, the Assessment Measures of Counter Services in ASC was drafted to incorporate the performance at ASC into the overall evaluation of each agency. Each year, the Xintai government would award agencies and staff ranking high in the annual evaluation. An interviewee mentioned that, “once we enter ASC, we follow the instructions and rules to work with other agencies”.

ASC also work vigorously in “system standardization” as a strategy for integrating and regulating various service processes of different agencies. During the standardization process, ASC pursues strategic balance, takes comprehensive consideration, and conducts patient negotiations to have the standards accepted by various agencies.

4.2.6. Reengineering service processes

ASC also reengineered service processes through negotiations with agencies to strengthen the coordination and integration of each agency’s services. Taking the establishment of a restaurant as an example, businessmen should first apply for “food service license” issued by the Public Health Agency before they go to the Industrial and Commercial agency to open a tax account. The sequence of the procedure is determined by business nature and policies. In order to make better experience for citizens, the ASC reengineered the service processes by connecting separated processes into chained processes and even parallel-handled processes. Before a specific process was reengineered, detailed application qualifications, required submissions, complete process, allowed processing time would be reviewed, discussed and negotiated carefully and sufficiently to form a consensus among all involved agencies.
4.2.7. Ensuring system compatibility and security
The operation system of ASC allowed all participating agencies to have access to it and made sure that it was compatible with each agency's own system. Technological measures were adopted to ensure information security and alleviate concerns of some agencies.

4.3. Organizational effectiveness and challenges
The study finds that a strategic fitness between external factors and internal strategies has been achieved in ASC to some extent and has improved the organizational effectiveness of ASC. As a result, ASC has significantly improved efficiency and effectiveness. More importantly, by bringing multiple agencies together, ASC also changed the existing structure and model of public service delivery. Furthermore, the formal and informal collaborations among agencies were enhanced. The study also found that, thanks to working together in a relatively transparent space, ASC prevents government officials and staff from corruption or power abuse.

However, challenges still exist. First, although agencies at the city level have collaborated, their supervising departments at higher level (such as those departments at the provincial level) still work separately. Therefore, collaborative operations in the ASC are sometimes challenged. In order to foster horizontal collaboration, ASC developed an information system to facilitate information sharing among agencies. However, resistance from their supervising departments restricts the horizontal cross-departmental information system from being integrated with vertical business systems of various agencies and hinders information sharing among agencies in the ASC. That is to say, the extent of vertical integration between each service counter at ASC and its superior department is much higher than the horizontal integration among service counters in the ASC. Vertical integration stands for the logic of specialization division, and horizontal integration stands for the logic of seamless collaboration. The former emphasizes top-down authority, while the latter prefers parallel synergy and information sharing. It was found in ASC's case that strong vertical integration limits horizontal collaboration to some extent. Consequently, vertical information flow performed much better than horizontal information flow among various service counters at ASC, and a seamless horizontal collaboration has not been realized yet.

Secondly, the service processes across horizontal agencies remain a problem. With regard to service processes involving more than one agency, although integration has been achieved, most applicants still have to revisit ASC several times. The study finds two reasons. One is that most applications are still paper-based, which slowed down and separated processes; the other is that due to limited space at ASC and some other reasons, some agencies have not yet entered ASC, which leaves some gaps in service processes. Therefore, some department heads pointed out that the next reform goal should be to achieve more integrated processes and seamless one-stop services, so that applications can be automatically transferred from one department to another.

5. Discussions and conclusions
By bringing about systemic change and structural transformation, cross-departmental collaboration has been proved by many studies to be an effective way of solving complex or even “wicked” problems and improving public service. Based upon Veliyath & Srinivasan's (Veliyath & Srinivasan, 1995) framework, this paper examines the factors, strategies and organizational effectiveness of cross-departmental collaboration in public service delivery through a case study in China.

The case study in Xintai finds that almost all external factors identified in existing research have also been found in the Chinese case. Also, internal orientations such as strategic resources allocation and organizational arrangements are also significant in China’s collaborative programs. Strategy selection is found to be important in the process of cross-departmental collaboration to leverage factors and improve organizational effectiveness. The strategic fitness between external factors and internal orientation has achieved collaboration effectiveness to some extent. However, a lack of collaboration still exists. Collaboration among different agencies requires more effective strategies and measures to be taken.

Some new factors are also found in the Chinese case. “Administrative reform” is identified to be a significant factor in fostering cross-departmental collaboration in China. Administrative reform at higher-level government could promote collaboration at local governments. With regard to organizational orientations, guanxi, a unique factor embedded in Chinese culture, plays an important role in the case. These factors identified in the Chinese context could make contribution to literatur in the field.

The study also has limitations. Since this case study is based on a county-level government in East China, the results found in this paper may not be generalizable to other areas of China. Future studies could analyze more case studies at different levels of government as well as in different areas of China. Moreover, factors mentioned in this paper may have different weights in the collaboration process. Future studies could test their significances with quantitative studies.

References


