E-Government: The Implementation Of Effective Digital Technologies To Improve The Delivery Of Government Services To Their Consumers (Citizens)

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we examine the factors which may influence the implementation of effective government services over the internet (e-Government) at the federal, state and local levels. The authors argue that although the federal, state and local agencies have taken an initiative to integrate their services over the internet, the perpetuity of complex issues and limitations continue to slow down the process of effectively implementing e-Government. The paper broaches, by identifying, some of the factors that continue to influence the implementation of effective e-Government services. We further argue that the implementation of e-Government cannot be solved through simple technological solutions alone, but through a synergistic approach involving other factors, such as approaching the citizen with customer service orientation rigor, culture, training, attitudes and education inter alia. This paper is not the panacea but a soft approach that could be used by government agencies to integrate an online portal that focuses on its customers (citizens).

INTRODUCTION

overnments are turning to new technologies to enhance service delivery to their citizens, and thus improving citizen-state relations. The electronic Government (e-Government) Initiatives are focusing on renewing their administrative structure and processes. Additionally, these Governments are trying to provide government information and services online for fast delivery and cost effectiveness. The emerging of e-Government Initiatives include the worldwide web, which is used to create relationships between policy communities and government policy makers. The investment in developing a technological infrastructure includes a great deal of time spent nurturing an unprecedented degree of horizontal collaboration within and across government and partnership with citizens.

The authors contend that the three leaders in instituting e-Government services are Canada, Singapore and the United States of America. A study by Accenture (2001) analyzed twenty-two countries and categorized them in four groups depending on their overall maturity, i.e., innovative leaders, visionary followers, steady achievers and platform builders. Canada, Singapore, and the USA are categorized as innovative leaders. Norway, Australia, Finland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom are classified as visionary followers.

The distinction between the first two categories and last two is driven by service offerings and the development of integrated delivery portals across agencies. The most interesting finding by Accenture is that innovative leaders have achieved moderate maturity, albeit, there is more to be done. Canada is the highest ranked country in terms of efficiency in e-Government services, having scored about 72%. These rankings, although not psychometrically validated, indicate how complex the implementation of e-Government strategies has been. These strategies include the movement of e-Government through different phases of its life cycle, from passive information

provision to active coordinated service provision online. The main categories of these phases are: (a) using the internet to share information; (b) online transactions and service provision; and (c) integration.

The leaders of e-Government services, thus Canada, Singapore, and the USA, have generally progressed through the first two phases and are now embarking on the difficult process of integration of the services across agencies, across levels of government, and finally, through an integrated online portal which is customer focused and organized by customer service. The last phase is more complicated to achieve than the first two. The innovative leaders have, however, taken an initiative to take a leading role and serve as role models to other national governments to approach their citizens with a customer service orientation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this study, we analyzed the steps followed by e-Government leaders to have gone through the first two phases cautiously and yet steadily. According to Daniels (2001), an e-Government approach must be modeled on the best practices of the private sector, which is to tap into the knowledge and use it to identify applications of internet technologies the way business organizations do business. In the business environment, employees know of the very many potential opportunities using Information Technology (IT) to improve the services provided to their customers. The same approach can be modeled in implementing e-Government services to the citizens, using the best practices of the private sector.

The Canadian government has the most developed and integrated government web site. The web site is organized by whether the user is a Canadian citizen, a Canadian business or a non-Canadian, e.g., tourist. The links provided by the Canadian government are by service. The Canadian citizen page is a link titled, "Life Events: Lost Identification." This page lists all possible documents or certificates that any citizen might need to replace with a drop-down menu linking the user to information on how to get replacements of the identification cards (Segal et.al., 2002).

The USA government portal, on the other hand, operates along service oriented lines. The first page, which allows for extensive across agency, searches by audience. According to the Office of Management and Budget (USA), the e-Government must be citizen centered and that certain properties action must be identified in order to achieve strategic improvements. The four areas of service that must be tackled cautiously are: Service to Individual: A single point of entry to access government services – deploy easy to find one-stop shops. Service to Business: Use internet protocols to reduce burden to business. Additionally, coordinate many redundant reporting requirements. Inter-governmental Affairs: Make it easier for states and agencies to meet reporting requirements

Internal efficiency and effectiveness improve performance and reduce costs by using business betterpractices in areas of supply chain management, finance and knowledge management. In recent years,there has been a push by governments in developed countries to encourage the public to interact withgovernments through the internet.

In Singapore, for example, citizens have strongly embraced e-Government services. The government onthis Island wants to transform the country into an intelligent Island. The government has introducedinitiatives, e.g., educating the public in internet skills, implementing a nationwide broadband network thatwill deliver interactive multimedia applications and a dedicated portal that allows accessibility to a rangeof e-Government services. The encouragement that has been initiated by governments has producedsome positive results. On average, 31 countries surveyed by Accenture have accessed onlinegovernment services during the last year. More than half of the population in Denmark, Singapore,Sweden and Norway have used e-Government during the past year, and more than 40% of thepopulation in the USA, Finland, Canada, and Australia have used e-Government during the past year. The Table below shows the level of government online use in the year 2002:

TABLE 1

Country	% Of Population Who Use E-Government
Sweden	57
Norway	56
Singapore	53
Denmark	53
Finland	49
Canada	48
Australia	46
U.S.A.	43
Netherlands	41
New Zealand	40
Hong Kong	37
India	31
Japan	13
Malaysia	12
Lithuania	8
Latvia	8
Poland	4
TABLE 1: SOURCE: Taylor Nelson Sofres	

PLATEAUS OF E-GOVERNMENT

According to Graeme Gordon, Accenture e-Government practice leader, there are five plateaus of e-Government initiatives:

(i)   Online Presence
(ii)   Basic Capability
(iii)   Service Availability
(iv)   Mature Delivery
(v)   Service Transformation

These plateaus can be achieved if the following strategies are included in government policies. This is the purpose of this paper – to extrapolate this study to the developing countries. Developing countries can be equally effective if the following measures are followed.

Educating The Public In Internet Skills

In order to implement effective e-Government services, policy makers should have a policy dictating the direction of the country in terms of e-Government services. This can be achieved if the policy initiatives include educating the public in internet skills; at the same time, implementing a nationwide broadband network that will allow the delivery of multimedia applications and services.

Those countries that have followed the initiatives have seen a continuous increase in e-Government use. For example, there has been a large increase in the use of e-Government between 2001 and 2002 in the following countries: Australia, an increase from 31% in 2001 to 46% in 2002; Netherlands, from 31% in 2001 to 41% in 2002; and the USA, from 34% in 2001 to 43% in 2002 (Taylor Nelson Sofres, 2003). Digital inclusion for all citizens will require the government to invest in education to support technological progress.

Using Business Model As Guiding Notion

In the last decade, Canada's administrative revolution was driven by a set of management ideas and organizational re-engineering which they called "New Public Management". The New Public Management is based

on several assumptions. First, they assert that the world is rapidly changing in all its major dimensions. The economy is being restructured and globalization is changing the way business is conducted. In such a turbulent environment, Civil Service must be changed to take into account the changing environment. In doing so, they need to use the business model as a guiding notion to achieve their objectives. Additionally, government agencies must envision citizens as clients or customers as in business.

Citizen Involvement

In the business environment, the end users are involved directly or indirectly in the development of a product. In the e-Government environment, the private sector should play a bigger role in its development to ensure greater progress. The community should be involved in bridging the digital divide, through the setting up of community Information Technology centers which will enable the citizens to have easy access. If the private sector and community are not in the equation, there will be no progress in the digital divide in e-Government. It is the function of each government and developing country, in particular, to take the initiative in understanding the barrier to uptake the needs and expectations of the citizens or community. This, plus the improvement and communication of available facilities online, will have an increase in the usage of e-Government. Additionally, the governments must rethink their strategies and focus on the mechanism of delivery and also create citizen impact which can be done by reorganizing online service delivery around customer intentions.

Change Of Culture Vs Status Quo

The culture in developing countries has always been "don't fix it, if not broke." This culture has allowed mistakes to be repeated over and over again. For e-Government to succeed, the Civil servants must have a powerful work ethic accompanied by a deep commitment to public service. As was adopted in Canada, stressing for greater decision making for those individuals near the action is a prerequisite for greater e-Government implementation. The empowerment of public servants is a key part of the overall culture change (Tupper, 2001). The governments must employ performance indicators in such areas as health care delivery, social services, education and tourism. Those countries which are in the process of implementing e-Government should benchmark their performance to evaluate the results against allegedly comparable countries, i.e., Canada, Singapore and the U.S.A. Another implementation factor is dislodging people from their culture. In Britain, for example, the level of government online use is minimal, which was 13% in the year 2001. One of the reasons for not using e-Government is the Civil Servants or the British government has not persuaded the majority of the citizens of the benefits of doing business online. Additionally, the government has not been able to dislodge its citizens from their culture of wanting to be served by a human being, and not a machine. The attitude of not wanting to use a machine must be removed from the people's mental model.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have delineated some of the factors that may influence the implementation of effective e-Government. The major factors that may influence the implementation of e-Government include, but are not limited to: education, change of culture, change in attitudes, applying the business model and involving citizens (customers). One factor alone cannot solve the e-Government problem but the synergy of all the factors will facilitate the implementation of effective e-Government and delivery.

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