

Foreword to ERCIM News Issue on eGovernment

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By definition, eGovernment is simply the use of information and communications technology, such as the Internet, to improve the processes of government. Thus, eGovernment is in principle nothing new.

Governments were among the first users of computers. But the global proliferation of the Internet, which integrates information and communications technology well on the basis of open standards, combined with the movement to reform public administration known as New Public Management, has for good reason generated a new wave of interest in the topic. eGovernment promises to make government more efficient, responsive, transparent and legitimate and is also creating a rapidly growing market of goods and services, with a variety of new business opportunities.

To some, eGovernment might seem to be little more than an effort to expand the market of eCommerce from business to government. Surely there is some truth in this. eCommerce is marketing and sales via the Internet. Since governmental institutions take part in marketing and sales activities, both as buyers and sellers, it is not inconsistent to speak of eGovernment applications of eCommerce. Governments do after all conduct business.

But eCommerce is not at the heart of eGovernment. The core task of government is *governance*, the job of regulating society, not marketing and sales. In modern democracies, responsibility and power for regulation is divided up and shared among the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government. Simplifying somewhat, the legislature is responsible making policy in the form of laws, the executive for implementing the policy and law enforcement, and the judiciary for resolving legal conflicts. eGovernment is about improving the work of all of these branches of government, not just public administration in the narrow sense.

New Public Management is a kind of management theory about how to reform government by replacing rigid hierarchical organizational structures by more dynamic networks of small organizational units; replacing authoritarian, topdown decision and policy making practices by a more consensual, bottom-up approach which facilitates the participation of as many stake holders as possible, especially ordinary citizens; adopting a more “customer”-oriented attitude to public services; and applying market principles to enhance efficiency and productivity.

eGovernment gives New Public Management fresh blood. Not only does information and communications technology provide the infrastructure and software tools needed for a loosely coupled network of governmental units to collaborate effectively, the infiltration of this technology into government agencies tends to lead naturally to institutional reform, since it is difficult to maintain strictly hierarchical channels of communication and control when every civil servant can collaborate efficiently and directly with anyone else via the Internet.

Orthogonal to the division of power among the branches of government is the hierarchical organization of supranational (e.g. European), national, regional and local governments bounded by geographical territory. Information and communication technology creates a “new accessibility”, overcoming temporal, geographical and organizational boundaries. Thus eGovernment can facilitate new forms of collaboration among governments which cut across and diminish such boundaries. The EuroCities project is an example. Perhaps in the long term eGovernment will help to strengthen the identification of citizens with Europe.

eGovernment is not only or even primarily about reforming the work processes within and among governmental institutions, but rather improving its services to and collaboration with citizens, the business and professional community, and nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations such as associations, trade unions, political parties, churches, and public interest groups.

Using World Wide Web portals to create one-stop shops is one currently popular eGovernment approach to improving the delivery of public services to citizens. The basic idea of these portals is to provide a single, convenient place to take care of all the steps of a complex administrative process involving multiple government offices, bringing the services of these office to the citizen instead of requiring the citizen to run from office to office.

Web portals can deliver government services with various levels of interaction. Three levels are usually identified: information, communication, and transactions. Information services deliver government information via static Web pages and pages generated from databases to citizens, tourists, businesses, associations, public administration, and other government users. Communication services use groupware technology such as e-mail, discussion forums and chat to facilitate dialog, participation and feedback in planning and policy-making procedures. Transaction services use online forms, workflow and payment systems to allow citizens and business partners to take care of their business with government online. Typical applications of transaction services for citizens include applying for social benefits, registering automobiles, filing changes of address or applying for building permits. For businesses, perhaps the application of greatest current interest is the online procurement of government contracts.

Often one reads that these three levels of interaction are ordered by complexity, with transactions being the most complex. Presumably this is because of the apparent and challenging security and business process reengineering issues of online transaction processing. Providing high quality information and communication

services, however, is no less challenging. Information services need to evolve into knowledge management services and become adaptive, personalized, proactive and accessible from a broader variety of devices. Communication services need to evolve into collaboration services providing better support for argumentation, negotiation, deliberation and other goal-directed forms of structured discourse.

Among the most interesting and challenging sociotechnological issues of eGovernment are in the area of eDemocracy, which aims to apply information and communication technology to improve the public opinion formation process central to government's primary regulatory function. Here the ambition is to broaden actual public participation, not just the technical possibility, and counter political apathy without disenfranchising the poor or poorly educated.

The following articles give a good indication of the large number and variety of governmental processes requiring specific solutions. Together with the trend to outsource tasks and work with industry in private-public partnerships, this is likely to lead to rapid growth of the eGovernment market and create plentiful business opportunities, also for small and medium size enterprises. Viewing eGovernment projects as mainly an investment in public infrastructure is too restricted, since the investment is also aimed at reducing the size and costs of government while accelerating the growth of the eGovernment market, helping to create new businesses and jobs in the private sector.

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