

Submitting Organization: Centre on Governance
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Paper name: E-Government: Enabling & Empowering Tomorrow's Public Service
Category: Elements of Transformation | Leadership & Collaboration

E-Government:

Enabling & Empowering Tomorrow's Public Service

Submitted to: Privy Council Office (PCO),
Management Priorities & Senior Personnel Secretariat,
Government of Canada

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Date: January 31, 2001

This paper is derived from collective works and contributing experts at The Centre on Governance. Contributors include Professors Barb Allen, Luc Juillet, Gilles Paquet, and Chris Wilson. Nonetheless, responsibility for the final presentation of the ideas and content, including any errors or discrepancies, lies with Jeffrey Roy.

Moving industrial society government onto a digital platform would simply produce a digitized industrial government—a form of governance that would be increasingly out of step with the changing realities of citizens and businesses alike .

Introduction

E-Government is smarter government – one that is better enabled to harness new information, communication and social technologies in order to empower the public service of tomorrow. Effective change is premised on the necessary leadership of people, and the collective intelligence of all stakeholders in meeting the potential of a more interdependent world.

The objective of this background paper is to examine the new governance context driving the emergence of e-government. The paper then considers the key factors, choices and dilemmas likely to determine the public sector's capacity to effectively harness technology as an enabling force for renewal and leadership.

As a starting point, governance may be defined as effective coordination in an environment where both knowledge and power are distributed. Every organization is built on governance, whether formal or informal, ineffective or successful.

The rise of e-governance refers to new processes of coordination made possible or even necessary by the advent of technology. In the private sector, for example, e-commerce is much more than transacting on-line: it encapsulates the range of new organizational models that allow governance to be redefined in new ways.

The struggle to define a vision of e-government is partially rooted in the extraordinary expansion of the internet and its penetration of markets, communities and our public institutions. Yet, it also reflects our search for better ways to adapt in order to meet new spatial, digital and demographic realities. As the quote above implies, e-government cannot simply be derived by imposing new technology on existing governance models.

As the public sector adapts itself to a new environment, it must also serve as a catalyst for guiding all stakeholders toward a common path. E-government, therefore, becomes intertwined with the broader governance transformations reshaping and joining our economy, our society, and our polity.

1) The New Governance Environment - Shifting Contexts

Governance is in a state of flux – as all organizations struggle to adapt to a dynamic environment where the patterns of coordination are changing.

There are three main sets of inter-related forces driving the emergence of e-governance, and the corresponding search for new organizational models:

Spatial -	geography and place
Digital -	communications and time
Cognitive -	education and expectations

Globalization drives new spatial considerations that are changing our notion of place - as economic, and to some degree social and political forces for integration create new interdependencies beyond national borders. As a result, identity and community are less bound by geography, with new and far more complex networking patterns emerge.

More instantaneous communicating and changing perceptions of time are related considerations – as the expression “internet time” redefines many organizational activities in the private sector, and in government as well. A digital world implies instantaneous decisions and accessibility, and speed and responsiveness become the hallmarks of performance.

Changing cognitive capacities are the final contextual force driving change – as the rapid expansion of both information and education empowers populations to become less passive and better educated. Organizations struggle to define and retain the right mix of competencies in a knowledge-based workforce increasingly characterized by mobility, diversity and assertiveness.

These simultaneous forces are at the heart of the struggle to adapt to a new governance environment. For governments, however, there are inherent contradictions in each that must be recognized.

New notions of place mean that e-government emerges not within a traditional order of national processes, but rather a more complex picture of both globalizing and localizing pressures. E-government, at the national level, means interfacing with the new global possibilities and pressures, while empowering cities and regions with the tools to act collectively in order to prosper.

New notions of time also result in contradictory pressures for government. While “internet time” drives service delivery and the desire to be more customer-oriented, public interest considerations and more citizen-oriented government often heighten complexity and time requirements. Using new technologies to engage the public in more deliberative forms of democracy - the heart of citizen engagement - may well require more time - and more patience.

Similarly, demographic trends signal new challenges as an emerging knowledge society (driven by the so-called internet generation) will be contradictory in its collective demands. Government will be challenged to not only respond to these demands, but to also redefine the social contract of the new millennium - meaning the set of both the rights and responsibilities of connected citizens.

2) Reconfiguring Government

Everyone today struggles with terminology. We suggest that the term, digital government, reflects a partial re-configuration of the public sector through new information and communication technologies (ICTs). As such, digital government is quite close to Government On-Line (GOL). The critical mission is to improve service-delivery capacities through the potential of a new digital platform.

This new digital architecture is a crucial component of the e-government challenge – but it is also incomplete. It is crucial since the investments made into ICTs will lay a foundation for less a hierarchical and more flexible organization.

However, it is incomplete since these hard technologies alone cannot ensure better performance and ongoing learning. New social technologies are also required, meaning new skill sets, mind sets and approaches to leadership.

A definition of e-government that encapsulates a broader agenda of renewal may prove more helpful:

E-Government is smarter government – one that is better enabled to harness new information, communication and social technologies in order to empower the public service of tomorrow.

Effective change is premised on the necessary leadership of people, and the collective intelligence of all stakeholders in meeting the potential of a more interdependent world.

For any government, the major consequences of these governance forces will be felt, and are already being felt at three - highly interrelated levels:

People- empowering public servants with new skills and adaptive capacities to navigate an environment of uncertainty and change;

Partnerships - embracing new forms of collaborative, shared and performance-driven accountability both internally and externally; and

Power - engaging the citizenry and adapting political institutions.

People:

The new mix of information, communication and social technologies means that a major challenge of e-government lies in ensuring that all managers can appreciate and assess new technology - and its integration with human capacities. Technological change requires organizational changes in how people work, both individually and collaboratively.

Many international studies as of late have underlined the views of executives from both government and industry on changing human resource management. A clear trend is a growing reliance on an external and temporal workforce. Many estimates indicate that over the past five years, an increase from 10 per cent to 25 per cent in non-core (meaning non-full-time) staff has been common.

This crescendo of the external workforce may well accelerate with the technology-induced pressures for organizational innovation and flexibility. Government is becoming both more fluid internally and more networked externally as it moves toward a flexible and modular workforce.

The result is a more complex set of agendas, motivators, incentives and rewards that places interpersonal skills such as negotiation, facilitation, and consultation at a premium. These “softer” skills form a critical component of the new public servant – one who is much more collaborative and comfortable with change.

Partnerships:

A recent consultation on e-government (Crossing Boundaries) suggests a public service driven more by new organizational networks and less by traditional departments. The discussion highlights the importance of horizontal capacities for GOL and its inter-departmental requirements.

E-government will be partnership-driven. However, a major organizational challenge for government will be to simultaneously manage partnerships both internally across government(s) and externally across sectors.

Accountability is a key element of such a balance. The manner by which accountability is perceived and exercised will determine the degree to which it embraces more collaborative models of governance. There is a strengthening view that collaborative arrangements can make government more accountable to all stakeholders, including the citizenry, by introducing a broader range of perspectives and pressures into the governing process.

These tensions form the parameters around which new ties are being formed between governments and “vendors” of technology-based services and solutions. These growing complexity and sophistication of managing these ties bring new choices and new challenges.

Strategically, one of the most critical choices facing government is what portion of the new organizational architecture should remain internal (i.e. the core competencies); what portion can be external (i.e. outsourced); and how can this mix be defined?

The tensions between procurement and contracting on the one hand, and partnerships and networking on the other, are bound to intensify in a world of e-governance. For commodity goods and services, internet-based procurement promises delivery faster and cheaper. For technology-based systems, traditional procurement is no longer appropriate.

The need for dialogue between industry and government on such questions (a need now recognized and acted upon in Ottawa today) is a necessary starting point. What is important, however, is the recognition that such dialogue is neither temporary nor peripheral to e-government, but rather it is a central feature of an enabled government seeking to learn and adapt.

Power (and politics):

There are many claims that as confidence and trust in traditional forms of representational government erode, technology, specifically the internet, can foster renewed ties. Such renewal is premised on more direct forms of democratic engagement.

Yet, technology alone is insufficient. Recent studies and roundtables have all underscored that while the internet carries the potential for more direct citizen engagement, realizing this potential is a complex undertaking.

There are three major variables that will shape the nature of democratic reform - accessibility, security and privacy, and the role of the media(s).

Questions about accessibility are best typified by the phrase, digital divide, that implies a segmentation of our populations between those with on-line access and those without it. Yet, merely providing the infrastructure for connectivity does not guarantee enlightened use. The divide is much more complex.

In terms of security and privacy, there are many practical limitations to more widespread usage of technology in democratic process. Yet, it can be argued that this problem is temporary, to some degree, as over time technological improvements will likely continue to underpin an expansion of on-line activity.

It is perhaps the role of the changing media(s) that carries the greatest importance in terms of shaping government's evolution. First, however, an important distinction must be made between traditional media on the one hand, and new media on the other.

Traditional forms of media are essentially those that serve as intermediaries: they transfer and filter information. The new media, on other hand, denotes those channels of more direct and interactive communication - free(r) of interference and interpretation.

E-government involves both forms of media, each of which presents separate challenges for moving forward. Traditional media remains a critical factor in shaping public opinion. As displayed by various episodes of public management in Ottawa over the past year, the fairness and effectiveness of the media in playing this role can be the focus of an intense debate.

New media channels drive a world of more open and direct consultation - and enhanced public participation. Yet, results to date from experimentation with on-line consultation have been modest, and there is considerable debate around the quality of participation that ensues. Connectivity is necessary but insufficient.

In this sense, the phrase digital democracy is misleading. The implication that greater openness and broader public engagement are the direct result of connectivity is an overly-simplistic portrayal of the choices that lie ahead.

In a digitized environment, power will be shared through both forms of media, and the impacts on government are profound. The danger of the traditional media is that it can encourage defensiveness and paranoia at the apex of power in government, as many feel - often legitimately - under attack (linked to e-government, for example, witness the British government's pummeling in a recent edition of CIO Magazine for reported accusations of IT mismanagement).

These forces are potentially contradictory. As new media channels strengthen, the costs and complexity of managing information and responding to traditional media channels may well rise - with increasingly uncertain results. Some question the feasibility of containing information, as many OECD governments (particularly in Scandinavia) continue to expand efforts at greater transparency.

There is no simply solution to this media quagmire - but one aspect should be carefully considered. At an operational level, governments may well be better off pro-actively providing more information - and betting on an ongoing and more thoughtful form of public judgement than the more instantaneous reactions delivered by traditional media forms.

In other words, an effective, if indirect approach for traditional media is to elevate the level of collective learning as to the challenges and choices that lie ahead. Expanding public dialogues and engaging citizens more directly into public sector governance must be an important part of any e-government strategy.

The following chart summarizes some key distinctions between GOL today and e-government tomorrow, and the transitional governance challenges that result.

Today's Challenge versus Tomorrow's Transformation

Government On-Line (GOL)

E-Government

New Alignment Required

- today -
- tomorrow-
- transition -

People

- managed largely by existing public service workforce encountering new realities

- novel across government; perceived as more technical than strategic (likely to face resistance)

- will be shaped by demographic renewal of public service (particularly EX)

- need for broader retooling of public service to align technology, people and management

- E-Government must be viewed on a broader canvass of public service renewal, particularly at the leadership level

Partnerships

- contractual, and a traditional industry (vendor) - government (buyer) dialogue

- traditional accountability dominates (clear, controlled & assigned)
- requires a shift to new collaborative relationships
- new forms of shared accountability required (ethical & performance-based)
- E-procurement will expand for commodity goods; whereas more strategic & collaborative mechanisms are required for governance innovation

Power

- GOL is largely customer-driven (better services in digital form)
- need for communications and new service delivery architecture
- new media pressures for public engagement & need for more citizen focus
- need for consultation and new deliberative architecture
- Public input and dialogue are crucial to democratic renewal and citizen-centric view of E-government

Source: The Centre on Governance (2001)

3) The Elusive Goal of Alignment - Sketching A Way Forward

E-government is like a giant canvas on which the people can draw a new view, a citizen-centered view of their government.

{Carolyn Purcell, Executive Director, Department of Information Resources, Texas}

This quote is insightful - as it is both accurate and misleading. The accuracy stems from the real possibility that for those outside of government, individual

citizens or specific interest groups, can envision something entirely new - potentially quite different from the status quo.

Yet, the quote is equally misleading, or at the very least unfair - if taken from the perspective of those working inside of government today. Even if our Westminster Parliamentary structures of governance appear dated and in need of review, they cast powerful constraints around public administration and the capacity for innovation.

The way forward is delicate. An effective strategy to realize e-government must re-balance traditional administrative and political-cultural frameworks and the adaptive and collaborative requirements of e-governance. This new alignment process requires a renewed culture in government, one more open to the enormous potential of technology in its main forms.

Design considerations:

Efficiency remains a key principle for government - tied, in part, to an interconnected global arena carefully monitoring the fiscal performance of all countries. A key component of the potential of ICT is the capacity for reduced costs as new media channels create a compelling business case for delivering services on-line.

Yet, the "business case" of government is unique, as it is not driven by maximizing profits as in the marketplace, but rather by maximizing the collective potential of all Canadians, individually and organizationally, to lead productive and prosperous lives in a more electronic and knowledge-driven age.

Thus, efficiency gains must be weighed along with the investment being made to encouraging people to develop on-line skills. Cost savings is one variable in a more complex equation.

Adaptability is increasingly important as a principle. A critical part of the e-government challenge is the sobering recognition that the environment is not static: whether the federal government succeeds in getting all services on-line by 2004 is perhaps less important than the reality that the social, economic and political contexts of 2004 could well be very different from today.

This principle implies a public sector comfortable with technology in different forms. Adaptive e-government means deploying technology as an "enable" force for better learning and knowledge management. Information, communication and social networks will transcend traditional structures and boundaries. Accordingly, they must be unified not by control, but rather by mission and leadership.

Such learning requires dialogue in order to allow government to become both digital and deliberative. The challenge of deliberative government extends

beyond the need to improve existing capacities today. Deliberative government must engage its partners and the citizenry and define the future as well.

Deliberative democracy underpins social learning, and it justifies the growing pursuit of public and multi-stakeholder consultation techniques today.

Government must not only accept input: it must seek it and demonstrate how participation helps to define policy and improve service delivery. Perhaps the most contentious, and certainly the least discussed aspect of e-government is the role of deliberation in reforming democratic governance.

It is difficult to sketch out a future of a more direct and deliberative form of democracy. Yet, there is a growing (or gaining) consensus both in and around government that uncertainty with what lies ahead does not imply satisfaction with the status quo.

Some might suggest that here lies a separation between public service and political leadership, as public leaders must be prepared to advance the deliberative process of redefining democratic power itself. Yet, this separation is also artificial, as a key function of the public service is to provide the best possible advice to political leaders.

A useful, and indeed necessary component of e-government readiness will be strengthening the deliberative capacities of the public service, and anticipating the potential consequences for the democratic processes so closely interwoven.

What is required is an alignment of new skill sets within the public sector, of new relational ties to specialists outside of, but engaged with the public sector, and of the broader public in their dual capacities of both customer of government services and citizen of the democratic polity.

Such alignment will invariably remain elusive - and as such, the best one can strive for is to foster ongoing capacities for improvement and adaption. Such capacities are underpinned by learning - and as a result, e-government must be about working in a more strategic and collaborative fashion in order to strengthen collective intelligence.

The challenge of collective intelligence transforms government's role from one based on independence to one where interdependence becomes a guiding principle. Building e-government on this premise provides the fourth design consideration for bettering governance.

In sum, four crucial design principles of e-government are:

- Efficient

- Adaptive

- Interdependent

- Deliberative

Moving forward is a complex undertaking denoted by both risk and excitement. An open and inclusive learning process carries the potential for a better and broader understanding of the challenges that lie ahead - as alignment becomes both a shared and ongoing objective.

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Effective change is premised on the necessary leadership of people, and the collective intelligence of all stakeholders in meeting the potential of a more interdependent world.