

Key issues in e-government

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The basics

A large number of papers, studies, reports, memoranda, etc, are written every single month on the state of e-government across the World. This may be a consequence of both the growth of our base of experiences (e-government is on the mainstream for most advanced economies) and of the deep-rooted feeling that change in government could be accelerated by the leverage of information technologies (e-government as change).

The available literature does cover a broad spectrum of issues, among which:

- The quest for **time ubiquity**: “more services, longer”, 24/7 public services, always-on government
- The search for **simplification**: less red tape, less processes, through a one-stop shop view, with less costs (to citizens) and no time lost
- The commitment to **usability**: intuitive interfaces, obvious mental models, “first goes first” (allocating the best “screen space” to most used services).
- The challenge of **innovation**: launching new services that address emergent issues, as fast as possible, even before the constituency realizes the relevance of those issues
- The need for **interoperability**: citizens ask for a seamless, integrated environment of services, regardless of who is the “real owner” of a process. This requires, as far we now know, a philosophy based on web services (IP processes “linkable” and accessible through any net browser.
- The need to **reduce costs**: government might use the Net to improve the efficiency in procurement, by enlarging the number of potential providers and have them compete with better prices
- The challenge to **improve democracy**: we have now an interactive tool that makes it possible, at least in principle, to enhance the quantity and quality of the participation of citizens in a number of political (long term) and practical (short term) decision making
- The challenge of **instant accountability**: the current two-way interactive link between government and citizens allows new levels of control (monitoring and evaluation) by the later over the decisions and actions of public employees. Evaluation is no longer restricted to voting once every

four years. There is a real chance that people will control you more often, at any circumstance.

- The need to **do more with less**: financial constraints, in a difficult and turbulent economy, combined with the emergence of new issues that rise fast as new attractors of public interest (i.e. homeland security, immigration regulations, etc), and which must be addressed, require new levels of **productivity** in the delivery of traditional services (those that make the basics of the portfolio of any public administration in a modern society).

In a word: we have grown up. There are a large number of issues that have to be addressed in order to make e-government work. But e-government is nowadays in the mainstream of most modern societies. It is seen more as “a new rule of the game” than as a strategic turn you better take “for the sake of modern ness”. It seems now quite clear that either you commit to e-government or else. So far, so clear.

But some really challenging issues are finding their way to get our attention. They may make our path towards a better form of government less of a pleasant trip. We here below highlight some of the most intriguing.

1. Maturity brings audacity

Technologies, service packages and interfaces that could be seen as just too “radical” two years ago are now entering (or will soon be) the mainstream (for instance, the extensive use of voice portals and webots). Since we have learned a lot, we might now *deploy methods and technologies faster than any time before*.

For instance, knowledge management was as a “nice to have” thing some years ago, because there were only a very few number of tools and methods that did really work in this area. The same may apply to e-learning. But now these two “objects” can become useful leverages to change how the work is done in public administrations, by just changing how experiences and knowledge are shared by public employees. So, in a way, they are becoming “must have” things in most governments.

But some questions have to be taken into account :

- To what extent these new “things” are really a necessity or , rather, they are a result of surrender to consultants and tech vendors?
- How to develop guides to help e-gov strategists to tell the right tech from the wrong one?
- When to tell that a technology is mature enough to “bring it home”?

2. Openness starts inside

Follow the path that most companies have been across during recent years: they started by developing a web-based front-end dominated by the “bells and whistles” mindset to later understand that the critical success factor is using the customers’ feed-back to change your back-end. The critical issue is thus to connect your supply of services to your customers’ (i.e. citizens’) needs. In brief, you cannot help but understand what is perceived as value by your “clients” if you want to be useful.

This means that you should use the information you get as a result of the feed-back provided by the users (either voluntarily or involuntarily) to better tune your services. And, in order to do that, you have to design and develop an internal network enabling the sharing of experiences and solutions among your employees. In other words, you should combine the focus on an internet-based citizen-oriented platform of services (external mindset) with a focus on sharing the thoughts and experiences of public employees about the citizens’ use of those services (internal mindset).

Open government should then mean both *a platform for citizens* to interact with the government and *an environment for public employees* where they may share experiences to enhance the appropriateness and quality of the former. Therefore, we should have both inside and outside openness.

Questions:

- How to determine which services are the best as seen by citizens ?
- How to stimulate the dialog within the back-end of e-gov, when services are spread over a large, department-based, closed-minded organization?
- Are we value-oriented organizations?
- Do we care about the citizens’ feed-back?

3. Sharing through social networks

We do have a lot of experiences in e-government in Europe that are not appropriately shared because there may not exist the right place/tool/process to do so. If we would like to go *towards an E-government model* (“E” standing for Europe rather than for “electronic”) we need a place to share, exchange and even trade our experiences and solutions. If innovation must be the new driver for services to citizens in Europe, we have to find a way *to increase our innovation productivity* (enhance the output of new ideas that are “doable” as a result of an input of initiatives, experiments, experiences and solutions that hundreds of different public administrations around Europe are engaging in every single day).

It is quite clear that there is a need for a range of *directories and databases of know-how and also know-who experiences*, organized in form of projects and results, and, if possible, *ranked according some standard measures of efficiency and effectiveness*. And, beyond these data repositories, we might need to build *networks of innovators in e-government*, both real and virtual, that enable the sharing of thoughts and results on a regular basis.

Questions:

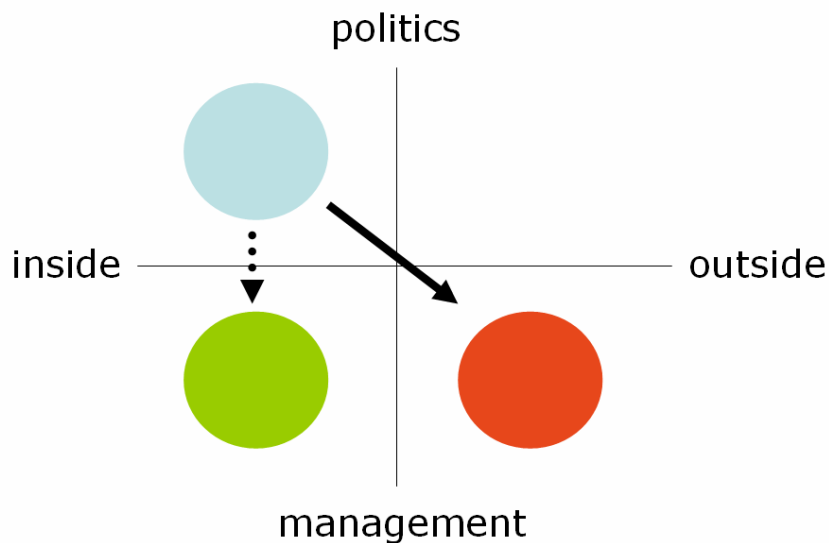
- What should be the field structure of the above mentioned databases?
- How to keep them reasonably updated?
- How to stimulate the sharing of knowledge across Europe in this field?
- May social networks be a helpful tool to connect people in order to exchange knowledge and results?

4. The limits of outsourcing

It is as though anything has now to be outsourced if it is to work within the allocated budgets. So goes the saying: keep the core, outsource the rest. But, what is “the core” in e-government? Should we outsource all of our services to citizens, just because of budgetary concerns?

It seems quite clear that we have to concentrate on bringing efficiency and “do more with less”. In a number of cases this means that we have to outsource our services to specialized organizations. But, at what cost?

The figure below illustrates that we may have moved too fast from the politics-inside corner to the management-outside corner. That is, from doing things inside with a sharp focus on politics (keep them happy till the next election) to doing things outside with a corporate mindset (financials do rule the organization). In the meantime, we may have lost a huge treasure of know-how, a very difficult knowledge to re-build.



Beyond that, we forgot that the extensive usage of advanced technologies and processes may act as key motivators to keep and attract the best people in public positions (since they are a powerful tool to improve their employability).

Finally, losing control over technology and other know-how may make even more difficult the transformation of government.

Questions:

- Can we base our e-gov strategy on radical outsourcing?
- Is outsourcing a matter of politics or of management?
- Does efficiency bring more votes?
- Is high tech as applied to public services a useful tool to keep your constituency happy, or is it a new rule of the game which does not discriminate among candidates?
- Is the transformation of government possible in an environment dominated by outsourcing?

5. Return to citizenship

It is necessary to develop new ways to measure the citizens' use of e-gov sites and services as well and their resulting degree of satisfaction. These measures should go beyond quantitative statistics and mere page counts. Even more, we might start to think more in terms of how useful we are in helping citizens to be more effective and successful on their private and social lives. Rather than measuring how they use "our" (in most cases mandatory) services, we should start asking ourselves if we contribute to their social and economic effectiveness by providing them useful and easy-to-use, updated, services and information, regardless of their "origin".

For instance, we should start measuring to what extent we provide quality contents that does make a difference on social and economic activities. In a way, governments should organize contents as they organize public space. Thus, a powerful contribution of governments to the amelioration of their societies may well derive from developing public "digital state" as effectively as they develop public "real state".

This may become one of the most important challenges in content management for the governments during the next years.

Questions:

- How to address the balance between having a public digital space (the gov website) containing privately generated information (not developed by government but useful to citizens)?
- How to determine which contents is best for which citizens?
- Is content comparable to territory?
- What are the challenges for content management in e-government strategies?

The e-gov matrix

In order to stimulate a debate around the key issues of e-government, we suggest that we address the different cells that appear in the figure below.

	The basics	Maturity brings audacity	Openness inside	Social networks to share	Limits of outsourcing	Return to citizenship
State of the art: possibilities and benefits						
Barriers and obstacles						
Implementation and organization issues						
Other issues						