1

From e-Commerce to e-Governance

The technology platform

Electronic governance (e-governance) is a spin-off from electronic commerce (e-commerce). In many respects, the modalities and functions that were developed initially in e-commerce have subsequently been transferred to governments, albeit in forms suitable to public administration rather than corporate administration.

In both e-commerce and e-governance, the 'electronic' component is provided by a combination and integration of computers and communications networks. The basis for the computer contribution has been the growing capabilities of hardware and software. In the case of the communications networks, new technologies and improved communications protocols had to be added to hardware and software to enable email and create the World Wide Web.

What this electronic platform provides is the capability to provide more effective and efficient governance using computers and communications. In e-commerce, the first use of the Internet was to distribute advertising and documentation more quickly, more widely and more cheaply. The initial exercises in e-governance were essentially the same. Government departments posted publicly available documents on '**the web**' to reduce printing and mailing costs.

Electronic functionality

Commercially, email was first used for internal co-ordination of operations and customer feedback. Government departments adopted similar uses. Colleagues used email to facilitate workflow and co-ordinate projects. E-mail links were also listed on Internet documents so that the public could follow-up with questions or suggestions about the government materials they were accessing and downloading.

The next phase of e-commerce involved selling over the Internet by taking orders for products via electronic forms. Payments for these transactions were enabled by the development of secure credit card processing arrangements. Tangible goods could be shipped to the purchaser by mail or courier, and intangible goods (software, electronic books and reports etc.) could be transmitted back as soon as the transaction was confirmed. Governments followed suit by collecting data with electronic forms (census etc.), accepting payments of fines and fees with card transactions, and selling publications and data in the same manner as is done with e-commerce.

Most businesses now have websites, as do most government departments. The latest developments have been to engage customers or citizens in consultations, either in some form of marketing research for companies, or policy research for governments. And just as increasing numbers of customers can make purchases electronically, so governments are also enabling electronic voting for citizens. In both businesses and governments, more and more of the co-ordination and communications throughout their organisations is being conducted electronically, and then stored and retrieved in that format as well. At the same time, since the technology is continually evolving, the need for updating and expansion requires ongoing investment and successive plans for change management.

Responding to deficiencies

A number of early evaluations of e-commerce and e-governance have concluded that these projects were only limited successes or outright failures. The shortcomings most frequently cited were missed deadlines, cost over-runs, unworkable technologies and training inadequacies. Compounding these difficulties was the situation with less developed countries, where the desire to achieve the benefits of e-commerce and e-governance was complicated by the lack of resources and trained personnel with which to build the infrastructure, and the lack of widespread connectivity of the wider public whereby to access such electronic services.

In response to such problems regarding e-governance, several governments, consultants, public interest groups and inter-governmental organisations researched the deficiencies and developed guidelines to alleviate them, both for more developed and less developed countries.

What next for e-governance?

The next challenges for e-governance within the Commonwealth will be similar to those faced wherever electronic networks prevail. Perhaps the most important characteristic of future developments is that they will diverge significantly from the e-commerce patterns of the past.

There seems to be a growing expectation amongst members of the politically-interested public that the culmination of trends in e-governance will result in full-fledged participatory democracy. People will want to be consulted and involved in policy development and regulatory specification in whichever areas they are concerned about. This is the long-term implication of ubiquitous networks and the concept of 'Citizens As Partners'. Both elected and appointed officials will still have the lead role in governance; **however**, the public will want evidence that their views are solicited, respected and factored into the governance process.

Another major role of e-governance will continue to be service delivery. There are contradictory requirements in this area. In so far as service provision depends upon individual eligibility (payment of taxes, fees, fines etc., and authorisation and/or

distribution of particular benefits), access can be customised by being based on specific personal profiles for every user. However, the public will only find this acceptable if files and databanks are not cross-referenced or used for enforcement of policies extraneous to the purpose for which the data is collected. The balance between customisation and confidentiality will have to be carefully crafted and continuously revised to reflect the changing nuances of public opinion.

Ongoing challenges for Commonwealth e-governance

The hidden side of e-governance will continue to involve the co-ordination of governmental internal operations. In many cases there are various idiosyncratic versions of the same functional processes, with the only justification for this diversity being the historical variability of different departments and agencies. The workflow is often too segmented, resulting in too many procedures, authorisations and personnel required for what could be simplified, faster, less costly activities. Those responsible for internal e-governance will continue to be pressed to squeeze additional efficiencies and expenditures out of these processes, in part so that the funds saved can be re-allocated to support the expanded public side of e-governance.

The most controversial e-governance issue of all, at least to date, is the trade-off between national security needs and open government expectations. Not surprisingly, national security practitioners base information sharing on the 'need to know' concept. Equally obviously, advocates of open government talk about 'the public's right to know'. If these two choices are placed along one dimension, the other orthogonal dimension for this issue would dichotomise political acceptability vs. constitutional constraints. Together these two dimensions would create a matrix with four types of policy options. Some sectors of the public will always want more information, and some sectors of the security establishment will always be able to rationalise why they think less information should be provided. Every choice requires political judgment – as such there are no hard and fast rules.

Conclusion

Because e-commerce set the precedent by developing before e-governance, and because each does incur direct and indirect costs, the question of who pays for both accessibility and services very quickly becomes an issue. Even though electronically-provided services save considerable money compared to printed matter and personal services,

Table 1.1 Trade-off between national security and open government

E-governance trade-offs between national security vs. open government		**Basis of information sharing**	
		The need to know	*The right to know*
Policy rationales	*Political acceptability*		
	Constitutional constraints		

the costs of extending networks and local accessibility, and of posting and updating web materials, may over the long run actually exceed the previous expense of more conventional service delivery.

It is the existence of this cost-barrier that is the major cause of the digital divide. The correlation of lower incomes with certain other social characteristics such as locality, ethnicity, education, occupation and gender, puts many of groups at a disadvantage regarding access to either e-commerce or e-governance.

The issue of the 'digital divide' will continue to draw attention, both in developing countries and amongst lower-income groups in developed countries. In fact, the Commonwealth Heads of Government at their 2005 and 2007 meetings in Malta and Uganda respectively encouraged and endorsed the Commonwealth Secretariat's Commonwealth Connects Programme as their flagship initiative to address the pressing digital divide challenge in the Commonwealth (see www.commonwealthconnects.net for further details). The initial definition of the digital divide focused on the presence or absence of connectivity. The combination of community-based facilities and improved incomes is slowly addressing this version of the digital divide, but there are still many people without either computers or telephones. A lot more infrastructure is required, and governments may have to be the major providers because the private sector may not see either a quick enough or large enough pay-back to make the investment worth their while.

The other aspect of the digital divide is the relevance of the information that is available even if connectivity is established. Different groups (depending on age, gender, income, education, occupation and service needs) want different types of information from their governments: 'One size does not fit all'. As a result of this growing recognition, website materials are being formatted and categorised to suit different clienteles. This trend will likely accelerate, and the only effective basis for it seems to be ongoing surveys of public information needs. Updates, revisions and new materials will have to be provided in a more timely fashion, to reflect the accelerated pace of change that the Internet is contributing to.

What the history of e-governance reveals, however, is that in the Commonwealth, as elsewhere, it is here to stay. The public now expects it, and furthermore expects its performance to improve in the foreseeable future. That is the goal towards which all Commonwealth governments should aim.