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From e-Government to e-Governance

Differentiating the two concepts

'E-government' and 'e-governance' can be defined as two very distinct terms. 'E-governance' is a broader topic that deals with the whole spectrum of the relationship and networks within government regarding the usage and application of ICTs. 'E-government' is actually a narrower discipline dealing with the development of online services to the citizen, more the 'e' on any particular government service – such as e-tax, e-transportation or e-health. E-governance is a wider concept that defines and assesses the impacts technologies are having on the practice and administration of governments and the relationships between public servants and the wider society, such as dealings with elected bodies or outside groups (not-for-profit organisations, NGOs or private sector corporate entities, for example). E-governance encompasses a series of necessary steps for government agencies to develop and administer to ensure the successful implementation of e-government services to the public at large. The differences between these two important concepts are explored further in this chapter.

The basis of the service

E-government is an institutional approach to jurisdictional political operations. E-governance is a procedural approach to co-operative administrative relations, i.e. the encompassing of basic and standard procedures within the confines of public administration. It is the latter that acts as the lynchpin that will ensure success of the delivery of e-services.

The 'e' part of both e-government and e-governance stands for the electronic platform or infrastructure that enables and supports the networking of public policy development and deployment. It is by now widely acknowledged that the original impetus for acquiring and using electronic apparatus in government and governance arose from earlier successes with the same kind of strategy in commerce. E-commerce had previously rested on credit and debit card processing for purchases, and on faxing of bulk orders and subsequent invoices in business-to-business transactions. In Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, for example, the emergence of e-commerce by the private sector helped to stimulate and drive the evolution of e-government within departments and agencies. At the political leadership level, it was clear that

e-commerce was reflecting the enormous changes taking place in the economies of countries in the developed world.

The transformation of the Internet from an academic research network to a publicly accessible information utility prompted increasing numbers of businesses to create a 'web presence'. The initial postings were mostly electronic advertising brochures and product catalogues, with invitations to 'order by phone'. As e-commerce came to the fore, it became apparent to governments that customer expectations were moving in the direction of greater speed and convenience for transactions; so direct ordering through the Internet was developed and launched. The only issue that still inhibits the public from taking full advantage of e-commerce, is the concern with security of information and funds, a challenge that is also reflected in e-government and e-governance.

The success of e-commerce encouraged governments to recognise that citizens were now able to undertake transactions online and they were also capable of using email as an important communications tool that sped up and changed the way they communicated with each other. The evolution of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s created expectations that if businesses and the population at large could engage in online commerce and share knowledge and information in ways never before conceived, then it was incumbent on governments to provide online services. This phenomenon was a case of governments having to respond to a cultural change in the way people dealt with each other and with groups in society on an international basis. The high expectations of change resulted, by the mid-1990s, in rapid development of e-government services.

In essence, because the public liked e-commerce when it worked properly, they began to want their governments to perform in the same way. In terms of services provided, e-government and e-governance developed along the same trajectory as had e-commerce previously. The internal operational aspects of e-commerce included rationalising supply chains and business rules. This aspect was referred to as 'back office' requirements in government, and it focused around more effective workflow and information sharing.

The external offerings of e-government and e-governance started with making policy documents available electronically. Both 'stand-alone' studies and ongoing series (newsletters, press releases etc.) were posted and could be printed out as hard copies or stored electronically by whoever in the public was accessing them. The second phase of electronic products and services consisted of online electronic forms, either to exchange information (census forms etc.) or to conduct transactions (to purchase documents, pay user fees, submit tax returns etc.). The third phase, now just emerging, involves consultation on issues of concern, and participation in policy-making and regulatory administration.

The point of the above mini-history is to demonstrate that, in terms of the electronic platform and its operations, there are parallels between electronics for governing and e-commerce, and between e-government and e-governance. The computers, cables, software languages and communications protocols are all standardised products for any

kind of electronic networking, regardless of its information content or organisational context. What differentiates e-commerce from electronic governing, and e-government from e-governance is the purpose and functions that such networking supports. E-commerce is premised on profitable transactions, whereas e-government provides public services and e-governance facilitates appropriate behaviour. So, in each case, the motivation and the mandate will be distinct.

E-government as better public service

The observation has become accepted amongst government analysts that the public expects more and more in terms of service coverage and customisation, while at the same time expecting to pay less and less for such services in terms of unit costs (and the aggregate tax bill). This consideration is behind the decision to put an increasing proportion of government documents online – electronic distribution places the cost of paper and printing on the consumer rather than the supplier, and in the case of government documents this accounts for the biggest share of the price of making these documents available. It also takes far less time and person-hours to design and post an electronic document than to print and mail out the same information.

Electronic forms are also premised on lower costs and more convenience. Many jurisdictions enable driver's licenses to be applied for or renewed online. Use of such things as publicly provided recreational facilities can also be booked (reservations) and paid for (user fees) via government Internet websites. Even when some kinds of special reports are made available online, access to them may still be by subscription or single payment. Background budgetary documents, expert studies or reports from commissions of enquiry may all have charges attached to them, depending on the government's dissemination policy and the costs of preparing the documents. When there is a price attached, governments have set up e-commerce arrangements for credit-card payments similar to those that prevail in the marketplace.

The exchange of information between governments and various segments of the public similarly occurs increasingly by way of electronic forms. Businesses report many of their financial and functional operations to their governments via the Internet as part of their regulatory requirements. Data on the kinds, volumes and revenues of transactions go to the government's statistical repositories, to the finance departments for taxation purposes and to the particular departments that oversee the kind of business being conducted (automobile production figures go to the department for transport, for example). Those of the citizenry who are recipients of welfare and social assistance services (whether they be individuals or organisations) frequently use government websites and email to exchange information and file claims. By these means, governments check on eligibility, inform claimants on the terms and conditions of support arrangements, and provide training or instructions on such matters as job searches and income management.

The 'final frontier' of e-government is the attempt at extending 'e-democracy'. Voting has been conducted online, and will likely be extended once the design of the

user-interface has been rendered more ‘user-friendly’ and the security of the information has achieved more credibility. Consultation on issues of concern has been widely practiced, but with mixed results. The difficulty in this case is with clarifying the terms of engagement. There are three alternate formats available: (1) ‘Tell us what you think/feel’ merely asks for public input without any promise of either reporting back on that input or using the substance of the suggestions; (2) ‘Share your views’ carries the promise to at least report back to the public the transcript of what was provided as advice, with or without comments as specified in advance; and (3) ‘Let’s co-operate’ involves the specific commitment to not only report back, but to actually use public input, or to explain in convincing terms why it is not to be used. The driving forces behind all of these developments will continue, as will the digitising of governments.

E-governance as co-ordinated propriety

The very concept of e-governance faces a dilemma: on the one hand, infractions of both legal requirements and good standards of behaviour have prompted many to ask for greater scrutiny and more stringent enforcement; on the other hand, overcontrolling through draconian statutes or proliferating regulations, has a stagnating effect on management decision-making and organisational innovation. Good governance in general, and e-governance in and between large institutions and governments, is seen as a way to avoid the aforementioned shortcomings and still produce better outcomes.

Even the technical platform for some of this co-ordination has proven to be problematic. Information sharing, knowledge sharing and jurisdictional co-operation (horizontality), are the means to achieve e-governance. The previous arrangement of jurisdictional ‘stovepipes’ was (and is) the problem, but overcoming this problem has not proven easy. Once information, knowledge and jurisdiction are shared, the old notion of bureaucratic control and accountability is jeopardised. The only effective response to this challenge (if the co-operation is to succeed) is to re-conceptualise the situation as ‘multiple contributions to common processes and solutions’.

Within governments, this e-governance will take such forms as these: shared databases of constituent particulars will assure consistent profiles are built and used so that services can be customised and repetitive data requests kept to a minimum (most constituents hate being asked for the same data by each department or branch). Where programmes or policies involve inputs from a variety of departments or branches, a single point of entry (‘one-stop-shopping’) can be arranged by creating a joint website that blends all of the requirements from the multiple sources, and presents it to the public as a unified programme or policy. In most cases, the users do not care where the inputs come from or what jurisdictional co-ordination was involved in producing the services – they just want the results to be convenient, high quality and low cost.

Between levels of government (national, provincial, municipal etc.) the mechanics of co-operation and co-ordination are even more challenging. From the public perception, a problem or issue as they see it may involve policy responsibilities and fiscal

implications from two or more jurisdictions. The planning, financing and maintenance of roads, the provision of health or education services, the regulation of land, water and air use, are all shared jurisdictions – but the public wants workable answers rather than excuses for persisting problems. However, this desire by the public for efficacious solutions does not alter the fact that co-operative arrangements have to be carefully thought out and diplomatically negotiated. The machinery of government does have hidden, long-term implications that may come back to haunt those who act too precipitously under the threat of public displeasure.

The e-governance solution to the handling of these diverging expectations is, ironically, both the most effective and the most disquieting to many public officials. Transparency is the one policy that expanding government networks can easily support. It can also shift the locus of contention away from public officials and onto disputing social factions. If consultation and participation are made transparent, the diverging values that cause policy conflicts can be revealed to be in the public domain rather than in the machinery of government. However, what this clearly leads to is the sharing of power with the public and other jurisdictions, to reflect their growing interdependence. As the scale, scope and complexity of situations and circumstances increases, this trend in e-governance will intensify.

