Realizing the Promise of Electronic Government

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The drive to implement electronic government (e-government) has become a pervasive global phenomenon. Countries around the world, from highly developed ones such as the United States to very small island states like Malta and Mauritius, have committed substantial resources to creating the environment and infrastructure for doing business electronically with their citizens, businesses, and other government entities. E-government is viewed by many as having the potential to enhance the delivery of services to citizens, improve the interaction between individuals, businesses, and civic institutions, and, at the same time, reduce the costs and time associated with delivering government services. It is also expected to empower citizens by allowing them to contribute directly to the process of public governance, as well as being a catalyst for economic and social development. The promise of e-government is tantalizing. However, as with any ICT-enabled transformation, the implementation of e-government is fraught with a multiplicity of challenges. Moving from a traditional stove-piped, bureaucratic, paper-intensive, and rule-driven environment to a more horizontal, networked, electronic, and citizen-centered one will require significant transformation in the administrative, legislative, technological, and sociocultural infrastructure of government and other civic institutions. It will also require a reoriented populace that is able to access and use government services electronically.

Research on e-government is embryonic and, therefore, diverse, somewhat unfocused, and oftentimes contradictory. The situation with e-government research currently mirrors that faced by e-commerce researchers most recently, and by IS researchers more generally, where fragmentation (Banville & Landry, 1989) and confusion (Checkland & Holwell, 1998) prevail. Consequently, attempts at being definitive about what constitutes e-government research at this stage is fraught with potential for controversy because key constructs and notions are still being developed and articulated. Much of what is written about e-government comprises practitioner reports, government documents, and white papers. Academic work in the subject is growing as researchers seek to explore and explain phenomena related to the e-government construct.

A key challenge in addressing issues related to e-government is determining what constitutes the notion, and what is actually meant by the term. A review of the literature indicates that the construct e-govern-
ment is imbued with a variety of shades of meaning and implication. On one extreme, e-government begins and ends with the improved delivery of services to the citizen using electronic means, particularly the Internet. On the other, it is a more all-inclusive notion, incorporating everything from service delivery to market development. Grant and Chau tackle this issue in their article, “Developing a Generic Framework for E-government,” which they begin by reviewing current definitions of e-government. They argue that published works by academics, practitioners, and government bodies have heavily focused on the electronic service delivery element of e-government. This is understandable, considering the relative immaturity of e-government development in most countries. They argue further that such a limited view of e-government will constrain the ability of governments, citizens, businesses, and other stakeholders to realize the full potential of e-government. Effective service delivery will only be possible with a more holistic, whole-of-government view of e-government. Consequently, they make the case for the development of a generic framework that will allow for a much more comprehensive view of the concept. The framework would become useful in analyzing, categorizing, and articulating e-government efforts around the world in a relatively “noise-free” way. In developing the proposed framework, Grant and Chau outline a number of key requirements that must be satisfied in order to be applied usefully in describing and analyzing e-government initiatives. The framework, once presented, is then applied in case studies of three countries’ e-government programs. Although the case descriptions were brief, they were able to show that e-government efforts of different countries followed diverse patterns of development. These patterns reflected existing contextual factors, strategic priorities, and levels of e-government maturity. Some countries concentrated on a service-delivery, market-efficiencies agenda, while others took a more balanced approach, giving significant focus to efforts across a broad class of applications. Admittedly, the framework proposal is a preliminary attempt to bring some coherence to the e-government space and will need to be further developed, analyzed, and applied.

The other articles in this special issue are arranged under the rubric of the notion of Strategic Focus Areas (SFAs) as outlined in the framework proposed by Grant and Chau. In the article, “Managing Stakeholder Interests in E-Government Implementation: Lessons from a Singapore E-Government Project,” Tan et al. discuss the notion of e-governance in e-government from a stakeholder perspective. They do this within the context of a case study of an electronic tax filing system implemented by the Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore (IRAS). They suggest that traditional notions of corporate governance, with a focus on coercive control as a means of gaining compliance to corporate requirements, have not been successful in aligning the wishes of agents with those of their principals. On the other hand, more “hands-off” means of controls as proposed by stewardship theory (Davis et al., 1997) also may not be successful in aligning interests. They argue for an approach that balances aspects of control and collaboration. To develop their argument, Tan et al. apply stakeholder theory in an attempt to explain how the notion of balancing control and collaboration elements can assist in promoting effective e-governance in e-government initiatives. In doing this, they used three mechanisms of stakeholder management: (1) identification of...
key stakeholder groups within an organization; (2) recognition of differing interests among groups of stakeholders; and (3) definition of an IT-enabled governance system that caters to and furthers the interests of stakeholders. One interesting outcome of their study is that there are limits to the extent to which stakeholders’ interests can be served. In the public sphere, certain stakeholder interests may have to be subjugated to the need to pursue and maintain the public good. They provide a number of implications of their study.

The third article, by Gefen et al., addresses an issue related to the citizen empowerment agenda identified by Grant and Chau. They explore the effect of trust and sociocultural similarity on perceived usefulness (PU) of electronic voting (e-voting) in two different contexts—the United States (US) and South Africa (RSA). Based on surveys of a diverse group of potential e-voters in the RSA and a less diverse group in the US, they found that both trust and sociocultural similarity were predictors of PU in the US sample of potential e-voters. However, only sociocultural similarity was a predictor of PU in the RSA. The finding that there was a significant difference between white RSA potential e-voters (university students) and the US sample of potential e-voters (also university students) was a surprise. The authors posit that this difference may be due to the fact that whites in present-day RSA may be feeling more marginalized and have less in common with those now in charge of the government apparatus. They assert that their study provides some insight into how to improve the PU of e-voting, particularly in the RSA. Other implications, as well as limitations, are addressed.

Kawalek and Wastell in their article provide evidence that challenges the notion that sees radical transformation as an implicit feature of e-government implementation. In case studies applying the SPRINT methodology, they found that radical change articulated in plans generated by participants in the process redesign effort were usually scaled down or abandoned during the implementation stage. It appears that institutional inertia provides a strong countervailing force against the implementation of radical plans. Most projects, though considered successful, fell well short of their potential for generating transformational change. Although the SPRINT method was designed specifically to foster radical process change in e-government implementation, its participative ethos may undermine its ability to motivate such change. Kawalek and Wastell question whether radical change is realistic, given the complexity and institutional inertia associated with public sector organizations. They suggest that instead we may have to pursue more incremental changes that over time may yield an occasional radical solution.

The articles in this special issue of the Journal of Global Information Management (JGIM), although somewhat eclectic within the realm of e-government research, represent one attempt to start the process of accumulating a body of knowledge that can form the basis for future research on this theme. I thank all those who made submissions to this special issue of JGIM. I am especially grateful to the authors of the articles in this issue for their diligence and patience. We hope that the JGIM will generate additional work that will bring improved clarity and understanding to this nascent area of research.

REFERENCES

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