Chapter XV

Empirical Study of the Municipalities’ Motivations for Adopting Online Presence

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Abstract

Nowadays, many public organisations rely on e-government policies to seek modernisation and efficiency, although they might not follow a true strategic purpose. This is particularly common on the subject of Web site development policies. The objective of this chapter is to reveal the motivations for creating a Web page in local administrations, and thus determine the real nature of their Web sites. A personal survey was addressed to the CIOs (chief information officers) of 65 city councils out of the 69 with Web sites of the province of Alicante (Spain), regarding their perceptions about the purpose of their Web pages. The results show that, although most councils confer a strategic orientation to their Web pages, communication goals are more popular than internal efficiency concerns. Consequently, a general lack of commitment is found with local e-government strategies. Understanding the implications of this duality may help other public organisations develop their modernisation strategies.

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New Requirements for Public Administrations

It is a major understanding that, in the information economy of the 21st century, organisations must compete by exploiting new sources of advantages and capabilities. This new economy is organised around the technology of Internet, and it has given rise to a dramatic modification of the basic parameters of time and space (Castells, 2001). As Porter (2001) and Carr (2003) affirm, a leading business today must be on the Internet to have a solid entity in the new economy; however, strategy cannot be based only in cyberpresence.

These arguments do not only apply to private sector firms. Those organisations, public or private, which ignore the potential value of and use of new information and communication technologies (NICT) may suffer essential competitive disadvantages. Indeed, public sector organisations also face the constraints of getting the approval of their “shareholders” (the citizens), to whom they must render accounts about how they manage their tax investments. Likewise, public organisations must consider citizens as customers, and thus provide them with best price and quality services (Cortés Carreres, 2001; Osborne & Gabler, 1992).

Therefore, it seems that the public sector is forcibly drawn to follow the same patterns that private firms do; this is, to evolve from efficacy to efficiency, and to use NICT on old structures to improve internal process management (Stamoulis, Gouscos, Georgiadis, & Martakos, 2001) as a result of the technological determinism that pervades this new economy. This is the phenomenon known as e-government, and its success will depend largely on the benefits and level of usefulness of the services it offers to citizens (Holden, Norris, & Fletcher, 2003). The benefits it is expected to deliver are a greater efficiency of the institutions concerned, improvements in public services, and political participation and transparency.

The urge to implement e-government policies has resulted in the adoption of many visions and strategic agendas (Accenture, 2004). However, each vision is driven by its own unique set of social, political, and economic factors and requirements. Consequently, the mission and objectives that emanate from such strategies vary enormously, according to the different views and conceptualisations of each government administration. These visions will be reflected in the applications and mechanisms that governments employ to implement their concept of e-government.

A government’s Web page is the most significant application of the presence and dynamics of e-government because, although almost every public organism has e-mail, not all of them have a Web site, so that only a certain percentage have consciously put a step forward to their integration into the new economy, being thus the sole instrument that provides for electronic relationships between both parties (Criado & Ramilo, 2001). This is propped up by the fact that the Web page is the ultimate channel of implantation and support of the e-government policies, in addition to being the basic instrument to develop a minimum level of maturity, according to some authors (Eyob, 2004; Layne & Lee, 2001).

It is especially interesting to study the case of city councils’ Web sites adoption. These particular public administrations play an increasingly important role as promoters of e-government plans financed by higher institutions. Moreover, their closeness to citizenship and local businesses contribute to greatly influence their lives (Holden et al., 2003), especially after the administrative decentralisation processes that have been happening lately in countries like Spain (MCYT, 2002).
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