Chapter 3
E–Government Success:
How to Account for ICT, Administrative Rationalization, and Institutional Change

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ABSTRACT

E-government is a complex undertaking, which encompasses technological, organizational, and institutional elements. Much research in the field has looked at ICT as a valid solution to make public administration more successful. This chapter offers a richer account of the role played by ICT in transforming public sector organizations, discussing the effects ICTs have in the rationalization of administrative procedures and public sector institutional transformations. The notion of techno-institutional assemblages is introduced to offer a new theoretical ground to frame the notion of success in e-government projects. It is argued here that successful e-government policies are the one that deliver the outcomes, which have led their initiation. Accordingly, the need for new indicators of success is identified.

INTRODUCTION

Much public sector information systems literature frames the concept of e-government success by drawing on private sector benchmarks. One example of this is when different stages in the evolution of e-government are discussed (Layne & Lee, 2001; UN & ASPA, 2002) in order to measure the success of the development of e-government strategies. In this case, the similarities with private sector ICT frameworks are evident. These stages, which build upon the ideas proposed in Business Process Re-Engineering (BPR) (Venkatraman, 1994), do in fact mainly assume that the level of technological sophistication can be an indicator of success, as it reflects a better propulsion of the organization towards more valuable businesses opportunities. In this context, ICT is conceived
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as the tool public institutions need to achieve a more efficient and rational way of working. As is common in the case of the private sector (Ciborra, 2000), the managerial perspective is chosen to discuss the role of ICT in the re-organization of work activities and to frame the notion of success in ICT-enabled public sector reforms.

Following this train of thought, ICT is perceived as the main instrument by which to achieve a successful transformation in the way public sector organizations produce and deliver their services. The challenge seems to be the identification of the right technology to lead the process of public sector transformation and to pursue the leading private sector managerial drivers, as it is in the case of New Public Management (NPM) programmes. Following this rationale, a rich literature has been produced, debating the effects of ICT adoptions at different government levels (Asgarkhani, 2005; Denziger & Andersen, 2002; Gupta & Jana, 2003; Melitski, 2003; Moon, 2002) and benchmarking countries against indexes of ICT readiness (UN, 2001), as if a better score would lead to more effective and therefore successful e-government programmes.

These indicators suggest a direct link between ICT diffusion in government and the efficiency of government actions. Although valuable, this focus on efficiency is at least questionable as it suggests that best practices and universal strategies are available with which to successfully implement e-government programmes, ignoring the rich literature that has argued that the notion of “best practices” is limited (Wagner & Newell, 2004, 2006; Wagner, Newell, & Galliers, 2006) where ICT deployments are concerned. As a consequence, we suggest here that, when the notion of success is discussed in the context of e-government, more attention should be given to the complexity that is associated with e-government implementations, rather than the focus being on best practices and universal strategies to prescribe how to successfully implement e-government programmes in line with private sector experiences.

The outcomes of e-government implementations are always associated with public sector reforms, which have an impact on social and political dimensions, and these need to be accounted for when these sorts of implementations are assessed.

In this chapter, we suggest a different approach to looking at ICT in the public sector. Building on studies that have discussed the socio-technical nature of public sector ICT adoptions (Avgerou & Walsham, 2000; Contini & Lanzara, 2008b; Denziger & Andersen, 2002; Fountain, 2001, 2007), we argue that more attention ought to be given to the public sector context, and to the characteristics of ICT when discussing the success of public sector e-government projects.

Accordingly, we venture to show that e-government policies result in techno-institutional assemblages, which emerge from the interplay between the technical and institutional elements that are intertwined within every e-government project.

Our analysis suggests that the notion of success in e-government implementations is questionable. E-government projects unfold in trajectories that are very difficult to benchmark as the value, and therefore the success, of public sector reforms can only be assessed against the transient values that society accords to the actions of the public administration (Cordella, 2012; Cordella & Willcocks, 2012).

ICT IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

Public administration innovations mediated by ICTs (e-government) are at the centre of most contemporary public sector reforms. In public administrations, many government tasks are executed through a specific organizational structure, bureaucracy, which is designed to achieve the goals of fairness and equality (Meier & Hill, 2005). Bureaucracies are in fact very valuable solutions for standardizing processes used to coordinate procedural activities carried out to deliver ex-