Chapter I

Information Technology and Administrative Reform: Will E-Government be Different?

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Abstract

This article examines the theoretical ideal of information technology as an instrument of administrative reform and examines the extent to which that ideal has been achieved in the United States. It takes a look at the findings from research about the use and impacts of information technology from the time of the mainframe computer through the PC revolution to the current era of the Internet and e-government. It then concludes that information technology has never been an instrument of administrative reform; rather, it has been used to reinforce existing administrative and political arrangements. It assesses why this is the case and draws conclusions about what should be expected with future applications of information technologies—in the time after e-government. It concludes with a discussion of the early evidence about newer applications for automated service delivery, 24/7 e-government, and e-democracy.
Introduction

The past several decades have seen many studies of the impacts of information technology (IT) in business organizations and comparatively fewer studies in government organizations. The concerns of researchers have been largely the same across both sectors—effects on efficiency and effectiveness, changes to organizational structure, and impacts on work. Studies in government, however, have been unique in their concern with whether IT is a catalyst or instrument of administrative reform.

We define administrative reform as efforts to bring about dramatic change or transformation in government, such as a more responsive administrative structure, greater rationality and efficiency, or better service delivery to citizens. Toward these ends, governments historically have undertaken structural reforms, such as city-manager government; budget reforms, such as the executive; performance and program budgets; financial reforms, such as unified accounting; personnel reforms, such as merit-based employment and pay; and many others. Computing has been viewed as an instrument of such reforms and also as a reform instrument, per se. Such instruments are illustrated by urban information systems, integrated municipal information systems, computer-based models for policymaking, geographic information systems, and, most recently, e-government. The rhetoric of these computing-based reform efforts has been that computing is a catalyst that can and should be used to bring about dramatic change and transformation in government (Fountain, 2002; Garson, 2004; Gasco, 2003; Reinermann, 1988; Weiner, 1969).

The question of whether computers will bring significant organizational change is nearly half a century old. In a classic 1958 *Harvard Business Review* article, “Management in the 1980s”, Leavitt and Whisler forecast that IT would replace the traditional pyramidal hierarchy in organizations with a lean structure resembling an hourglass, and productivity would soar through the elimination of most middle managers. Laudon’s (1974) path-breaking *Computers and Bureaucratic Reform* raised the question of administrative reform specifically with respect to local government. IT generally is considered to have the potential to bring about administrative reform. For example, Fountain (2002) says, “Technology is a catalyst for social, economic and political change at the levels of the individual, group, organization and institution” (p. 45). Yet others have argued that information technology does not tend to produce such reform and that it is implausible that IT could cause such changes in the first place (King & Kraemer, 1985; Kraemer & King, 1986; Laudon, 1974).

The era of e-government, which can be defined as the use of IT within government to achieve more efficient operations, better quality of service, and easy public access to government information and services is now underway. The IT world that surrounds public administration in the United States has changed markedly. Technology diffusion within the society has been pervasive, with personal computers and the Internet extending to the majority of American households. Internet-based e-busi-
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