INTRODUCTION

This short article gives an overview of e-government in Switzerland about 10 years after its introduction at the municipal, cantonal and federal levels. It outlines the technical and political difficulties recently encountered for the further development of online services at all levels and presents some good examples of what has been achieved so far. Opportunities for e-participation are also presented as a growing trend based on a few e-voting experiments at cantonal level. Since Switzerland is a multicultural country with four national languages, some of its e-government experiences and “lessons learned” can be useful in neighbouring countries with the same cultural background (i.e., Austria, France, Germany, and Italy).

BACKGROUND

The term “e-government” (cyberadministration in French, governo elettronico in Italian, but interestingly, e-government in German on the site www.admin.ch/ch/d/egov) has been used in Switzerland (and its national languages) for around 10 years now: the first public Internet sites were launched by the city of Geneva and the Canton of Basel in December 1994. As of 1995, the Confederation inaugurated its main site, (www.admin.ch), to which were grafted, little by little, the seven Federal ministries. By the end of 1999, all the Swiss Cantons had official sites. In 2005, nearly all Swiss municipalities had a homepage. Only 59% of them, however, have a well developed site, whereas the others make do with mini-sites hosted by the Confederation or by their Canton. Today, a directory of official Internet sites in the public sector that is maintained by IDHEAP (www.gov.ch) contains around 2000 URLs. On an international level, Switzerland position has worsened over the past years: From 7th (in 2003) to 9th (in 2004) place in the World Economic Forum Network Readiness Index (WEF, 2005); from 15th to 20th place in the European Union Online Availability of Services study (DGISM, 2004), and from 11th to 62nd place in the Brown University Global E-Government Study (Brown University, 2004). See also (eVanti.ch, 2005).

Despite the efforts made over these 10 years, the barometer of e-government published in 2005 by the University of Applied Sciences, Bern (Brücher & Biswanger, 2004) reveals that public Internet sites are not well known by the population: the figures range from 51% of those taking the survey being aware of their cities’ sites, to 41% for their canton’s site, to 29% of them for the Confederation’s site, and only 6% for the Swiss “national” portal, www.ch.ch. Moreover, the existing sites are only used by 14% of inhabitants, although 80% of the population has Internet access at their homes or offices. In addition, half of the surfers do not trust these public sites sufficiently to entrust them with their data. Finally there are few administrative services available online on a transactional basis: 493 communes offer such e-procedures out of 1,822 communes with a Web site, and only nine of them have more than 10 e-procedures (Barbey & Abbet, 2004).

Good examples of e-government, nevertheless, exist in Switzerland (see the following paragraph), and there is a need for sharing these among specialists. This, notably, is the role of the eVanti project (www.eVanti.ch), an initiative on the part of the Swiss Confederation that is similar to the approaches taken in the European Union (Good Practice Framework) and in the United States of America (Best Practices Committee). The conferences organised in 2004 and 2005 by eVanti.ch, presented a first qualitative panorama of what is taking place in the cantons and cities of Switzerland, as well as at Federal level (see for example, eVanti.ch, 2004a, 2004b, and 2005). A common language is necessary, and if possible, one exempt of poorly-understood American-English terminology. We should drop the “e” in front of each concept, as suggested by a seminal European report (Leitner, 2003), and concentrate on a comprehension of the “Internetisation” phenomenon in the public sector, in Switzerland as abroad.

THE SWISS E-GOVERNMENT ICEBERG

On the basis of the experiences presented during the eVanti conferences, we can affirm that an “e-government iceberg” exists in Switzerland as in many countries. The tip that is visible is constituted by the technical problems that this type of high-tech project cannot fail to encounter
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