Implementing E-Government Strategy in Scotland: Current Situation and Emerging Issues

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ABSTRACT

Using Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) to transform public services is a central element of the current UK Government’s strategy for modernising government. This paper explores the development of e-government by an in-depth study of the current position in the public sector in Scotland. The research involved an evaluation of the web sites of a wide range of public sector organisations, a survey of chief executives and interviews with five key stakeholders. The results of this research suggest that public sector organisations in Scotland recognise the importance of e-government but are currently at a very early stage in developing electronic services. There is a gap between the rhetoric about the potential of e-government and the reality on the ground. In particular, the public sector organisations involved in this research appear to be more sceptical about the ability of ICTs to break down barriers within and between organisations than those who advocate e-government as a solution to this problem. Issues on balancing conflicting objectives between implementing E-government strategy and other strategic initiatives will also be highlighted. The paper concludes by suggesting a number of key issues that will need to be addressed if e-government is to fulfil its potential and transform the way public sector organisations manage their activities and interact with customers and citizens.

Keywords: e-government, e-commerce, e-business, public services, Web evaluation, organisational transformation

INTRODUCTION

Back in 2000, the Economist (24 June 2000) argued that ‘[a]fter E-Commerce and E-Business, the next Internet revolution will be E-Government’. In the Information Age, the role of the government is not only to create a favourable environment for their citizens and businesses, but also to use information and communications technologies (ICTs) to transform the way that the public sectors conduct their business and deliver services to citizens and businesses (Bellamy & Taylor, 1998).

The current UK Government has set out an ambitious agenda for modernising public services. At the heart of the strat-
egy is the delivery of integrated services across organisational boundaries through the use of ICTs (Cabinet Office, 1999; Oakley, 1999). In Scotland, with the devolution of power from the central government, the Scottish Executive is responsible for the delivery of a wide range of public services. It has generally endorsed the UK Government’s modernisation agenda. This paper looks at the development of e-government in Scotland.

The paper is largely explorative, combining a detailed literature review with comprehensive empirical research of the public sector in Scotland. The rhetoric of the UK Government’s modernisation and e-government strategies is based on the implicit belief that ICTs can be used to transform the public sector. But what is the reality on the ground? How are public sector organisations currently making use of ICTs and the Internet in particular? How are they planning to exploit the potential of ICTs in the future? What are the main drivers and barriers to the development of e-government? These are some of the key issues this research seeks to address.

The next section examines the efforts to reform the public sector that have been going on since the earlier 1970s, and describes the move from the traditional public administrative perspective to a more managerial or business-oriented approach. Previous research on the role of ICTs in transforming organisations in general and in the development of e-government in particular will be reviewed. Then the methodology and the techniques used in undertaking this research are outlined. Following that the paper presents the findings of an evaluation of the web sites of Scottish public sector organisations, which seeks to evaluate the extent to which these web sites currently reflect the objectives and priorities of the UK Government’s modernisation agenda. The findings of a survey of chief executives in Scottish public sector organisations will also be presented, and it describes how they perceive the importance of the Internet now and in the future, the arrangements that their organisations have put in place for managing the implementation of e-government, and their views about the key drivers of and barriers to the development of e-government. Finally, some key issues emerged from the research will be highlighted.

MODERNISING GOVERNMENT: THE THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

In 1999, the UK Government set out an ambitious programme for ‘modernising government’ in a White Paper. Its central aim is to ‘achieve better government, better policy making, better responsiveness to what people want and better public services’, by reforming the machinery of government in the UK, particularly through the use of ICTs (Cabinet Office, 1999).

Bureaucracy, New Public Management (NPM) and the ‘Third Way’

Traditionally the public sector was seen as profoundly different from the private sector. The origins of this can be traced back to the first half of the 20th
The Functionality of Online Shopping Site within the Customer Service Life Cycle: A Literature Review


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