Chapter 10

Perspectives on E–Government in Europe

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ABSTRACT

The e-government scene in the EU is undergoing profound changes. The gradual increase in online availability of services has now reached a point where new challenges are appearing, such as trust-building, increasing citizens’ confidence and the use of existing services, as well as the need for new more efficient e-inclusion policies. Citizens of today have new demands which require new responses, also in terms of enhancing the participatory process. ICT and e-government have an important role to play in this respect.

INTRODUCTION

Today, as the first decade of the 21st Century comes to an end, the European eGovernment scene is at a turning point. The developments witnessed since the beginning of the decade have been remarkable: eGovernment in Europe has developed from being merely an informative platform, into becoming a true channel for interaction between citizens and governments, as well as a true channel for the online provision of governmental services. At the same time, in this decade we have witnessed the increased importance of information and communication technologies (ICT) and the internet in everyone’s everyday life. Our way of shopping, communicating, understanding the world, obtaining services, etc. has been changed due to the incorporation of ICT. This increased presence of ICT in our lives has raised numerous questions on the potential impact that the incorporation of these technologies in our democratic participatory processes could have in terms of quality and accountability of our democracies. Moreover, the ‘boom’ of the social internet that has taken place
in recent years has set an important example on how these technologies can transform reality. In this context, one only has to think of the implications that applications such as Facebook.com or Twitter have had in understanding such events as, for instance, the post-electoral crisis in Iran, and how the access to these technologies has given voice to the citizens. Although this is only an example, it illustrates perfectly the existing trend that gives the internet and ICT a crucial place, not only in the provision of services, but also as powerful tools for communication, networking and social participation.

In the eGovernment scene of the European Union these profound changes have become a major challenge and have, at the same time, brought about myriad opportunities. The needs and wishes of our citizens and business have grown more complex, and governments have to respond to the challenges posed by adapting to the new needs by offering new services when needed, and keeping a strong commitment to delivering the best value to its citizens and businesses. The financial crisis has, moreover, accentuated the need for significant use of ICT in order to achieve greater productivity and efficiency, and as a flexible element to provide better services. Nevertheless, this is a situation that has not only affected private enterprise. Public administration is faced with the need – and the opportunity – to become a driver for innovation and an example of good practice in this context of stagnation. Therefore, with the incorporation of ICT in public administration aimed at reducing unnecessary administrative burden and thus eliminating the need for citizens and businesses to bear extra costs in terms of time and money, the public sector can become a trigger for efficiency gains and cost reduction in European societies.

Success in these ambitions, however, will not depend exclusively on the capacity of European governments and EU institutions to introduce ICT as a preferential and more efficient channel for communication with citizens and businesses. Issues such as trust and confidence building, as well as the development of secure and interoperable auxiliary services, are of major importance (European Commission, 2009c). Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, the current ratios of ICT penetration in European households and businesses show an important need for improvement (Eurostat, 2009). Extending ICT penetration ratios and actively promoting eInclusion policies are sine qua non critical success factors for the future of eGovernment in Europe.

Therefore, the main challenges that European governments and EU institutions face today consist of concealing the necessity to satisfy the new needs of citizens and businesses to receive their required governmental services in a faster, cheaper and more efficient manner; while at the same time promoting the use of the existing services and extending the percentage of population with qualitative access and sufficient skills to take active part in the information society.

CHALLENGES: THE CHANGING GOVERNMENT AND THE CHANGING CITIZENS

Citizen-Government Relations: New Needs and New Demands

Our societies – often described as the ‘knowledge societies’ – are extremely dependent on information. However, thanks to this fact they also have an unprecedented potential for distributing knowledge in a more equal way and of offering job opportunities that overcome the traditional barriers of distance or physical space.

However, the widely available access to ICT and its advantages has not only changed the way people interact with each other or with the private sector; governments and public administration are enormously affected by this. When citizens know and become accustomed to receiving increasingly faster and more efficient commercial services with a better value through the internet, they also