Chapter X

Implementing Digital Government in the Finnish Parliament*

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Abstract

The Finnish Parliament has been active in utilizing information and communication technologies in the parliamentary work as well as in communicating with citizens and other organizations. As common in public sectors, work, knowledge management, and communication in the environment is document-centric. A strategic issue in implementing digital government has been SGML/XML standardization. The Finnish Parliament has been a pioneer in the adoption of SGML/XML technologies. The chapter reports experiences from the standardization efforts. The implications of the standardization will be examined from the viewpoints of documents, information technology, work with documents, the Finnish Parliament, and the whole society. From the point of view of a citizen, the major effect of the standardized document production is the improved accessibility to legislative information through the Internet. Plans for new knowledge management solutions and semantic Web services will be discussed at the end of the chapter.

Introduction

In democratic societies, the rules of the societies, as well as the history of the development of the rules, are documented by government agencies. The work in the agencies is document-centric. Therefore, a critical factor in the implementation of digital government is effective implementation of electronic document management. Digital governments of the future will be complicated inter-organizational networks where parties involved share, send, receive, and distribute documents. Data and system integration in the networks requires major efforts in document standardization.

The importance of document standardization was realized in the Finnish Parliament already in the middle of 1990s. Incompatibilities of systems, inconsistencies in representations, heterogeneity in retrieval techniques, and uncertainty of the future usability of archived digital documents activated major standardization efforts. After a careful analysis, the Standard Generalized Markup Language (SGML) (Goldfarb, 1990) was chosen for the standard format of documents in the Parliament. The implementation of SGML has been a demanding task. The effects of the standardization have concerned documents, document production, archiving practices, information distribution, and inter-organizational collaboration. From the point of view of a citizen, the major effect of the new solutions is the improved accessibility to legislative information through the Internet. Currently work is going on to implement a transfer from SGML to its subset XML (Extensible Markup Language) (Bray, Paoli & Sperberg-McQueen, 1998).

In the chapter we will describe the standardization process in the Finnish Parliament. We will also describe the outcomes of the standardization project, which has been a major redesigning and rethinking effort. In standardizing documents, the rules for representing information in them were defined. The standardization affected not only the documents themselves. Also the roles of the people working with the documents, the workflows of the document production, and the tools used in the domain changed in implementing the standards (Salminen, 2000; Salminen, Lyytikäinen, Tiitinen & Mustajärvi, 2001). The standardization was quite a complicated process and required a lot of motivation and resources. In the background section of the chapter we will first discuss the document standardization process in general. Then we will describe the environment of the Finnish Parliament and the pre-standardization situation of the document management there. After that a chronological narrative of the standardization efforts follows. The implications of the standardization will be examined from the viewpoints of documents, information technology, work with documents, the Finnish Parliament, and the whole society. Finally, the plans for the extension of the standardization to concern metadata will be discussed.
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