E-Government Development at the Local Level in Australia Using a Framework for Connected E-Government

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INTRODUCTION

Dawes (2008, p. 86) defines e-government as 'the use of information and communication technologies to support public services, government administration, democratic processes and relationships among citizens, civil society, the private sector and the state.' In the simplest of terms, e-government refers to electronic government or the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs) in the management and delivery of public information and services at all levels of government agencies (Edmiston, 2003). E-government projects can potentially enhance information sharing, aggregation and reuse, and reducing the costs of back-end office operations.

The UN e-government survey states ' governments around the world are moving forward in e-government development in an effort to enhance public information and service delivery and to improve the efficiency and productivity of government processes and systems.' (United Nations, 2008, p. 23). One of the emerging changes in structures of governance is the growth of connected governance structures. A connected government model provides an efficient and effective way of conducting government business transactions with citizens and businesses and within governments themselves. For the purposes of this study, the term 'connected e-government' means thinking and acting in ways that tie the levels, units, and agencies of government together for common purposes. These purposes include service to citizens, business and other sectors and support for government operations.

The Australian Commonwealth Government established a new service agenda to adopt a whole of government approach to realising responsive government in its 2006 e-government strategy (AGIMO, 2006). To move forward towards the vision of a connected and responsive government, local government plays a crucial role in key areas of service provision of particular importance to local communities. In fact, community participation at the local level is often higher than at a national level in Australia (Shackleton, Fisher, & Dawson, 2006).

The study reviews e-government development at the local level in Australia and proposes a connected e-government model that aims to increase the quality of government services and improve the effectiveness and efficiencies of local government operations. This research attempts to provide a framework for understanding how connected e-government at the local level can help achieve this end.

BACKGROUND

While Australian e-government initiatives have received longstanding international recognition (United Nations, 2008), Australian local government lags behind in terms of showing signs of preparedness to move into the next stage of service provision in comparison with the UK local government initiatives in e-government (Mckeown, Teicher, & Dow, 2004). As Sarikas and Weerakkody pointed out, 'many local governments are lagging behind the national expectations for e-government implementation due to various political, organisational and technical challenges' (Sarikas & Weerakkody, 2007, p. 155).

As the international research suggests, 80% of citizen to government transactions take place with local, not central government (Socitim & I&DeA,

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2002). However, the government websites at the local level are typically not as well developed as those at the federal level. Edmiston (2003) conducts two surveys of 2600 municipal and county governments and finds that although the vast majority of local governments have established Web sites, very little had been done to integrate e-government into their daily affairs because of marketing, privacy and funding barriers.

Local city council's web sites are a prominent product of e-government initiatives. Although the vast majority of the local councils in Australia maintain web sites and provide a good source of information for citizens, most of the council sites are still relatively basic. The wider benefits of G2B (government to business) and G2C (government to citizen) interactions still remain largely unrealized. The literature indicates that e-government falls short for interactions between government, business and citizens (Reddick, 2009). Few have made substantial progress in integrating e-government into their business processes (Mckeown, Teicher, & Dow, 2004). A survey of the state of e-government in the Australian local government sector shows only 6% of e-government initiatives focus on the inter-municipal or inter-governmental activities and more than half of the governance professionals surveyed were unable to identify electronic government activities undertaken in other organisations (The E-governance Team, 2004). The research findings indicate that understanding of the connected government approach in the local government sector remains basic and lacks depths (The E-governance Team, 2004).

A recent research on the e-local government development in the great western Sydney (GWS) region shows that the local governments in the GWS in Australia have not developed truly sophisticated e-government services (Fan, 2011). The research findings suggest that the majority of the local government websites are primarily informational and they provide one way communication of information from government to citizens and none of those local websites have established full portal capacity through which residents can navigate to needed information and services within governments or across governments (Fan, 2011). The researcher concludes that even the leading councils investigated are less than half way to reach their full online service potential and most of the local councils still have a long way to go to achieve connected government (Fan, 2011).

A FRAMEWORK FOR CONNECTED E-GOVERNMENT

How could e-government evolve from a simple website into a fully integrated one? The existing e-government literature considers e-government development an evolutionary phenomenon and has provided various models of e-government maturity or stage models (Layne & Lee 2001; Moon, 2002). For instance, Layne and Lee (2001) suggest a four-stage growth model for e-government starting with establishing an online presence, moving to interactions, transactions and transformation. These stage models offer the advantage of simplicity and can provide guidance for e-government development. However, Shackleton, Fisher and Dawson (2006) argued that the existing e-government models did not 'truly reflect how local governments are implementing successful online web services'. Brown suggests that maturation models play some role but linear e-government progresses sequentially from lower levels to higher ones are less helpful at the local level (Brown, 2007 as cited in Dawes, 2008).

Klievink and Janssen (2009) found 'the development and implementation of the final stage of e-government is a major and complex task'. Many local governments do not have the organisational capacity to take the next steps of creating a transaction-enabled citizen-centred e-government. On the other hand, if local government organisations have the resources and capabilities needed to reach the highest growth stage, they do not have to progress through stages of maturity (Klievink & Janssen, 2009). In shifting from a basic e-government to networked e-governance, a more effective e-government development model is clearly required. This research attempts to develop a framework for connected e-government that aims to improve the desired operations that the local government websites are meant to fulfil and efficiency and effectiveness of government operations and to facilitate communication and the coordination of authorities at different levels of government, within and between organizations. Underlying the concept of connected e-government fits well with a service orientation approach to bring high value information and services to citizens and to improve efficiency and effectiveness of government back end operations. Drawing on the five SOA[1] (service oriented architecture) entry points developed by Carter (2007), the proposed framework