

Chapter 15

Administrative Flexibility and Knowledge in Policy Delivery

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ABSTRACT

Information and communications technologies are emerging as important drivers of reform in the public sector. This chapter explores both enabling and constraining aspects of the role that ICTs can play in transforming the development and delivery of public policy. Two issues are explored: the reduction in flexibility of decision making that frequently accompanies ICT-based initiatives, and the critical role of knowledge embedded in networks of stakeholders in policy development and delivery. A case study, which traces the knowledge embedded in networks of relationships of actors involved in developing and implementing operational policy in an Australian public sector agency, is presented to illustrate the unintended constraints on knowledge activities. A framework for analyzing socio-technical networks involved in integrating ICTs into the cycle of public policy is presented.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge is central to the activities involved in developing and implementing public policy and information and communication technologies (ICTs) undoubtedly have the capacity to transform how knowledge is managed and applied. This potential for leveraging of knowledge occurs

within the context of an evolving administrative infrastructure which is being shaped by e-Government initiatives. While the capacity for ICTs to transform public policy delivery are continually expounded, large-scale IT implementations can also have unintended – and potentially negative consequences.

“Knowledge Management” (KM) and “e-Government” are two related trends to emerge over the past twenty years which have significant

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implications for the activities and performance of public administration. ICTs are at the heart of e-Government initiatives which promise to transform the operation of public sector agencies and in a similar vein, the effective leveraging of knowledge within public administration through KM initiatives can also be facilitated through the application of ICTs. The benefits of applying ICTs in the public policy development and delivery are generally seen in terms such as improved service delivery, better administrative decision making, efficiency of processing and improved communication. Outcomes such as these will in time undoubtedly be achieved on an ongoing basis as governments become more and more experienced and sophisticated in the approaches they take when applying ICTs. However, research and experience in the implementation of ICT systems over many years has consistently shown that the disruptive nature of change driven by large-scale ICTs can have unintended impacts. Therefore, in addition to investigating the potential benefits of ICT transformations in public policy, these consequences and the potentially constraining nature of the technologies themselves need be considered.

The objective of this chapter is to highlight and explore two issues in relation to the application of ICTs in policy development: the reduction in flexibility of decision making that frequently accompanies ICT-based initiatives; and the critical role of knowledge embedded in networks of stakeholders in policy development and delivery. It is argued that the (re-)structuring of activities, roles and procedures which are brought about by the implementation of large ICT-based systems can lead to disconnects between the knowledge embedded in the activities of policy development and the knowledge embedded in the implementation of policy through the delivery of services.

A case study of organizational units within an Australian public sector agency is used to illustrate how different forms of knowledge are embedded across variety of activities from policy development through to service delivery. This analysis is

set against the background of the implementation of a large-scale e-Government system which acts as the primary technological infrastructure for the agency's activities. The analysis examines the relationship between the knowledge activities and the system implementation to suggest that when integrating ICTs into activities which develop and deliver policy, specific attention should be given to the networks of relationships and associations between various stakeholders and actors.

BACKGROUND

E-Government Transformation and Impacts

The use of ICT in public administration and e-Government initiatives in particular, will provide many long-term benefits for the community and over time, will transform relationships between citizens and government. Many e-Government initiatives focus on streamlining the delivery of services to the community and the role of ICTs is usually seen in terms of providing efficiencies in information transfer and the removal of layers of bureaucratic "red tape" (Landsbergen & Wolken, 2001). These initiatives often have the underlying assumption that public service is all about taking a customer (or citizen) focus and providing efficient and effective service delivery. The benefits of service-oriented initiatives are self-evident but only represent the more publicly visible outcomes of ICT-based public administration transformation. The transformative capacity of ICTs goes beyond service delivery and includes the back-office activities which are at the heart of public administration. For public sector organizations, the "service" delivered to the community is the tangible outcome of public policy processes. Activities involved in public policy process include community and stakeholder consultation, policy analysis, policy instrument development, policy implementation, policy co-ordination, and

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