Chapter XVI

e-Government in Canada: Services Online or Public Service Renewal?

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Moving industrial society government onto a digital platform would simply produce a digitized industrial government—a form of governance that would be increasingly out of step with the changing realities of citizens and businesses alike.[1]

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the efforts of the Government of Canada to harness information and communication technology (ICT) as an enabling force. Various forms of e-Government are now clearly on policy and managerial reform agendas of the public sector. The extent to which the challenges are well understood, however, is the source of much debate. Some managers and politicians remain particularly sceptical in the face of spectacular claims of external commentators that the Internet is a revolution in both citizen expectations and service delivery.

Yet, e-Government is expanding. As online activity grows across private, public and civil spheres of organizational life, and as governance transformations impact organizations across these sectors, governments are not immune. The more relevant question is whether they can orchestrate change by fostering adaptive capacities, or whether change will be imposed.

This chapter begins from the premise that e-Government presents a real transformation in democratic governance, including design, decision-making and service delivery capabilities. Importantly, e-Government takes place within a changing governance context where

technology itself may only be one driver–as people debate the extent to which it is a tool for improving current systems or a key for redefining them. Whatever the balance here, the struggle is that government must redefine itself for a world of e-Governance, even as this world is shaped by a variety of dynamic forces.

As we move forward, we provide some definitional parameters around governance and government and the relevance of the now omnipresent "e." The next section looks at the centrality of partnerships in this new context. We then examine the impacts on people– particularly within government, and draw from extensive interviews with senior public servants and reports on how they interpret the challenges that lie ahead. The next section builds on this reporting and offers a forward-looking assessment of the likely evolutionary scenarios that lie ahead. We end with conclusions.

DEFINITIONAL CHALLENGES–GOVERNANCE AND GOVERNMENT

As a starting point, governance may be defined as effective coordination in an environment where both knowledge and power are distributed. Every organization is built on governance, whether formal or informal, ineffective or successful.

The rise of e-Governance refers to new processes of coordination made possible or even necessary by the advent of technology–and the spreading of online activities in particular. As a result, e-Government (a term that we further define below) in the broadest sense refers to an IT-led reconfiguration of public sector governance–and how knowledge, power and purpose are redistributed in light of new technological realities.

In summarizing what has been written about the information age and/or digital world to date, our perspective is that there are three main sets of inter-related forces driving the emergence of e-governance and the search for new organizational models across all sectors:

Spatial - geography and place

Digital - communications and time

Cognitive - education and expectations

Globalization drives new spatial considerations that are changing our notion of place, as economic and, to some degree, social and political forces for integration create new interdependencies beyond national borders. As a result, identity and community are less bound by geography, with new and far more complex networking patterns emerging (Paquet, 1997a).

More instantaneous communicating and changing perceptions of time are related considerations–as the expression "Internet time" redefines many organizational activities in the private sector, and in government as well. A digital world implies instantaneous decisions and accessibility, and speed and responsiveness become the hallmarks of performance (Guillaume, 1999; Tapscott and Agnew, 1999).

Changing cognitive capacities are the third set of final contextual forces driving change–as the rapid expansion of both information and education empowers populations to become less passive and better educated. Organizations struggle to define and retain the right mix of competencies in a knowledge-based workforce increasingly characterized by mobility, diversity and assertiveness (Rifkin, 2000; Rosenau, 2000).

These simultaneous forces are at the heart of the struggle to adapt to a new governance environment. For governments, however, there are inherent contradictions in each that must be recognized.

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