

Current Approaches to Federal E-Government in the United States

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Melinda E. Chen

Food and Drug Administration, USA

Charles K. Davis

University of St. Thomas, USA

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. government is making strides to provide electronic access to government agencies and services. A variety of issues are involved when implementing e-government programs such as electronic tax filing, access to drug information, and so forth. Financial, technical, personnel, and legal issues are common. Privacy issues in the creation of e-government are also of interest to both the e-government implementer and citizen. There are a variety of issues in planning and implementing projects of the scope and magnitude of e-government. Issues such as user requirements, organizational change, government regulations, and politics, as well as descriptions of planning and implementation frameworks, are important. Experience in developed countries shows that it is not difficult for people to imagine a situation where all interaction can be done 24 hours each day, 7 days each week.

Many countries, including the United States, France, Australia, Greece, Canada, Singapore, and Italy have been offering government services online (West, 2004). According to Sharma and Gupta (2003), Canada, Singapore, and the United States are categorized as “innovative leaders” (p. 34) whose continued leadership in the creation of e-government and more mature online services sets them apart from other countries. Canada leads the way in e-government innovation while Singapore, the United States, Australia, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Finland, Germany, and Ireland are countries in the top-10 list. Several Asian countries such as China, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Bangladesh, and Burma have initiated the concept of e-government as well (Dodgson, 2001).

An article in *Federal Computer Week* (Perera, 2004) reported findings of a recent poll indicating that 77% of Internet users (or some 97 million people) in the United States have gone online for government information. E-government is rapidly becoming a key priority of the government of the United States.

OVERVIEW OF E-GOVERNMENT

E-government refers to the delivery of national or local government information and services via the Internet or other digital means (Galindo, 2004; Sharma & Gupta, 2003). E-government is the process of transacting governmental business with the public through the use of automated systems and the Internet network. Another way to look at e-government is to see it as an online government service. The purpose of e-government is to provide an e-portal: “a one-stop Internet gateway” (p. 35) to major government services by the streamlining, simplification, and integration of services of various government agencies (Sharma & Gupta, 2003).

One of the key potential benefits of e-government is the enhancement of citizens’ access to government information and services, as well as increased citizen participation in the democratic process (e.g., e-voting). Government’s customers are increasingly more demanding, and a survey of federal chief information officers found 86% believing that e-government improved service delivery and 63% feeling it reduced costs (McNeil, Tolbert, Mossberger, & Dotterweich, 2003).

The most widely used application of e-government is the publication of information for citizens on the Internet. One challenge to achieving more robust usage is to create an interactive, real-time government service vs. the present static environment. A few governments have Web enabled their transactional systems to allow their constituents to conduct business over the Internet (West, 2004). However, the majority of these systems is limited to a single agency and is not fully integrated with all the governmental structures. The National Science Foundation (NSF) has attempted to address the challenge of helping government agencies adopt concepts derived from basic research and adapt them to the practical problems of government work (Marchionini, Samet, & Brandt, 2003). The NSF Digital Government Program strongly supports research into the development of e-government.

Fountain (2001) states that IT changes the capacity and control features of traditional bureaucracies. Power can be redistributed as well as functional responsibilities within and across federal agencies. This change can affect how the public sector ultimately functions.

HISTORY OF E-GOVERNMENT

A June 2000 initiative from President Clinton created an integrated online service system that placed federal-government online resources on a single Web site (<http://www.firstgov.gov>). This administration promoted the idea of “reinventing government” to improve government efficiency and citizen participation (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992, p. 60). This initiative attempted to build one-stop access with \$500 billion in U.S. government funding, with \$300 billion going to grants and \$200 billion to procurement opportunities. Following this federal initiative, many local governments adopted IT for various aspects of local governance.

The E-Government Act was signed by President Bush in December 2002. The purpose of this bill was to increase public access to governmental information. This law requires the federal government to use Internet-based information technology to enhance citizen access to government information. The new Office of Electronic Government within the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) was created in response to the act to encourage the government to make its Web sites more user friendly (GAO, 2004; Tillman, 2003). This office will focus on capital planning and investment control for IT, information security, information privacy, and the access to and preservation of government information (OECD, 2003). The e-government office oversees the development of an integrated Internet-based information system for each federal agency while establishing government-wide policies to support IT standards. Interagency committees are also set up and periodic reports with recommendations are recorded (GAO).

The E-Government Act created two programs: (a) the Federal Information Technology Workforce and (b) the Federal Information Security Incident Center (Tillman, 2003). The former program’s initiative requires the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to assess the government’s IT personnel needs. The OMB manages the Federal Information Security Incident Center, which maintains a list of information security incidents and informs the agencies of potential security threats and vulnerabilities.

E-government activities are financed by an e-government fund. The General Service Administration (GSA) manages the fund, which will support OMB-approved e-

government projects. Executive Order 13011 created the Chief Information Council in 1996 to develop recommendations on federal information-management policies. Individual federal agencies must develop a set of e-government performance measures dependant on their customer-service record, productivity, and use of innovative technology. Each agency also needs to provide the public with consolidated access to government information and services through an integrated Internet-based portal (OECD, 2003).

The E-Government Act also requires the government to be more accountable. The bill requires every regulatory agency to establish a Web site to collect and post public comments on every rule it considers. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has a Web site that establishes public comment periods and considers public opinions before a law is promulgated (Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, 2003). The public now has access to a database of the voting records of Congressional members and the independent analysis of bills from the Congressional Research Service (Tillman, 2003).

Information security is also an important goal of this new legislation (Miller, 2002). National security and law enforcement groups coordinate the management of threats to federal IT with private-sector organizations. Each agency is accountable in preventing unauthorized access to their information systems. Independent auditing is also part of the process.

E-government services used most frequently are filing personal income-tax returns, applying for a state fishing or hunting license, renewing professional licenses, submitting employment information, registering a complaint against a business or a professional licensee, renewing a driver’s license, and requesting a government loan. E-learning also provides training opportunities for federal agencies (Welber, 2001). A strategy developed by Health and Human Services (HHS) personnel and IBM uses a portal on the Internet outside the HHS firewall that allows employees access to it at anytime, anywhere.

ISSUES IN PLANNING

Implementing an e-government framework is a challenging task. Unless careful preparations are made, e-government is not likely to succeed. According to Sharma and Gupta (2003), there are several key recommendations for the planning stage. Creating e-governance awareness is essential at the initial stage. A massive campaign should be conducted to raise the awareness of e-government services and try to build commitment for e-governance. Workshops, programs, seminars, conferences, Web-based documentation, or individual meetings are part of this

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