

Global Benchmarking of E-Governments



Herwig Ostermann

University for Health Sciences, Medical Informatics and Technology, Austria

Roland Staudinger

University for Health Sciences, Medical Informatics and Technology, Austria

INTRODUCTION

Metaphorically, the term benchmarking traces back to land surveying, where a *benchmark* is referred to as “a mark on a permanent object indicating elevation and serving as a reference in topographic surveys and tidal observations” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, n.d.). Its linguistic roots originate from “the chiseled horizontal marks that surveyors made, into which an angle-iron could be placed to bracket (*bench*) a leveling rod, thus ensuring that the leveling rod can be repositioned in the same place in future” (Wikipedia, n.d.). In the most general term, a benchmark is a point of reference from which measurements may be made. Applied in a business context, benchmarks therefore serve as “measurements to gauge the performance of a function, operation or business relative to others” (Bogan & English, 1994, p. 4).

Based on that understanding, the essential business concept of benchmarking can be defined as the continuous and systematic process of improving strategies, functions, operations, products, or services by measuring, comparing and analyzing relevant benchmarks in order to produce superior business performance (Böhnert, 1999; Schmitz, 1998). Thus, in contrast to the static nature of benchmarks representing reference points, according to its original meaning (ensuring the exact repositioning of leveling rods at any time) the activity of benchmarking involves deploying the former as terms of reference to make progress.

In the pursuit of superior performance, benchmarking embraces the elements of comparison and change (Spendolini, 1992) based on information and knowledge derived from the very process of measuring and comparing benchmarks. First, public and private companies discover how their functions, operations, products, or services perform in comparison to those of benchmark partners. Second, having identified best practices “there is a call to action that may involve a variety of activities, from the making of recommendations to the actual implementation of change based (at least partially) on the benchmarking findings” (Spendolini, 1992, p. 15).

Taking into consideration the dynamic thrust of benchmarking activities outlined above, global benchmarking of e-governments is thus widely regarded as an essential stimulus for further e-government development, as it may facilitate the evaluation of national efforts compared to international best practice on the one hand and promote successful implementation of e-government applications serving the needs of citizens and businesses on the other from a conceptual point of view (Kunstelj & Vintar, 2004).

In order to identify the contribution of international benchmarking studies to successful design and implementation of e-government initiatives and models, this article will present the study designs and major outcomes of three benchmarking reports on e-government development. Based on these findings the authors will critically review these three study series, by raising the question whether the approaches pursued to benchmark e-government development show the aptitude to cope with the complexity of the socio-technical system e-government and thus support its comprehensive evaluation.

BACKGROUND

According to the United Nations (2003a), “governments are increasingly becoming aware of the importance of e-government to improve the delivery of public services to the people” (p. 128). The roots for this recognition lie in two recent and interrelated phenomena: First, the rapid pace of globalization has caused an incorporation of intra-country trade and investment into transnational networks with economies striving to offer more competitive products and services. Second, advances in information and communication technology (ICT) have triggered new progress in the integration of these networks and in the improvement of the efficiency of businesses and services (United Nations (UN), 2003a). In order to satisfy the demands of citizens in the context of a changing environment, there seems to be no chance for governments around the globe to ignore “the imperative of e-government.”

In this context, it is generally felt that the evaluation and measurement of e-government initiatives represents “an important or even essential element in the development and introduction of e-government” (Kunstelj & Vintar, 2004, p. 1). Consequently, e-government benchmarking studies and reports are first and foremost characterized by their multitude—according to Bannister (2004) benchmarking of e-government has even “become a small industry” (p. 1)—as well as by different approaches to evaluate e-government development. Overall, Kunstelj and Vintar (2004) identified more than 40 national and international reports monitoring, evaluating, and benchmarking e-government development.

Global e-government surveys are mainly conducted by international consulting and market research organizations (Kunstelj & Vintar; 2004). In the year 2004, Accenture issued its fifth annual report on E-Government Leadership, in 2001 the World Market Research Centre conducted the first Global E-Government Survey (since 2002 published annually by the Taubmann Center for Public Policy, Brown University, Providence, RI), and in the same year Taylor Nelson Sofres started publishing its annual global study named Government Online: an International Perspective (Dexter & Parr, 2003; Rohleder & Jupp, 2004; West, 2004). Further examples of international e-government studies include the Balanced E-Government report compiled by the Bertelsmann Foundation and Booz Allen Hamilton as well as the Global Information Technology Report published since 2001 by the World Economic Forum (Schmidt et al., 2002; Schwab, 2005).

Moreover, global benchmarking reports are conducted or commissioned by international or supranational organizations. Since 2001 the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs has compiled the UN Global E-Government Survey on a (bi-)annual basis and Capgemini annually surveys the “online availability of public services” of European Union member states (also including Norway, Iceland and Switzerland) on demand of the European Commission (CGE&Y, 2003; UN, 2001; UN, 2003a). The latter institution is also involved in benchmarking e-government services by assigning the “eEurope Awards” for e-government on a bi-annual basis since 2003 (Leitner, 2003; Leitner, Alabau, Soto Mora, Kreuzeder, Hallencreutz, Millard, et al., 2005).

In the following, the outcomes and study designs of the e-government benchmarking reports published by Accenture, West, and the United Nations in the year 2004 (in case of the United Nations’ report: 2003) will be discussed in detail. This selection is based on several considerations: First, all three studies feature a ranking of the countries surveyed indicating the status of e-government development measured by comprehensive indexes. Second, all e-government reports represent study series published at least on a bi-annual basis and thus reflect a

dynamic component. Third, as the main thrust of this article is to critically review *global* benchmarking of e-governments, the three studies presented in detail cover countries from all five continents worldwide. Fourth, the three studies series represent different types of editorships ranging from scientific institutions (West) to international organizations (United Nations) to global consulting organizations (Accenture) and may thus reflect different motivations for conducting e-government benchmarking research.

BENCHMARKING E-GOVERNMENT

Study Designs and Research Methodologies

In publishing the report E-Government at the Crossroads the United Nations (2003a) aim to contribute “to the development efforts of countries by providing a benchmark to gauge the comparative state of e-government readiness and e-participation for development in a rapidly globalizing world” (p. 133). Hence, the survey adopts a people-centric approach, focusing solely on government-to-consumer/citizen (G2C) and consumer/citizen-to-government (C2G) relationships. Within this study design, government-to-government (G2G) services are implicitly assessed, since advances in G2C and C2G relationships are closely linked to G2G improvements. Government-to-business (G2B) services, however, go beyond the scope of the survey and are therefore not measured (UN, 2003a).

The UN report presents a competitive ranking encompassing the status of national e-governments of all 191 member states according to two primary indicators: the state of e-government readiness and the extent of e-participation. Whereas the first indicator assesses the capacity of the public sector to use ICT for encapsulating in public services and deploying high quality information and effective communication tools to the public, the latter measures the willingness of governments to use ICT to provide high quality information and effective communication tools in order to empower people to able participation in consultations and decision-making. Methodologically, the e-government readiness index thus “assesses the quantity of information and services provided,” while the e-participation index “assesses the same from a qualitative perspective, with special focus on consultation and decision-making” (UN, 2003a, p. 136).

The e-government readiness index represents a composite index comprising the Web measure index, the telecommunication infrastructure index and the human capital index, with one third of the weight given to each component. Based upon a five-stage quantitative Web

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