Benchmarking Local E-Government

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INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, almost everything we do in our daily lives is being influenced by information and communications technologies (ICTs) including the Internet. The task of governance is no exception with an increasing number of national, state, and local governments utilizing ICTs to support government operations, engage citizens, and provide government services. As with other things, the process of governance is now being prefixed with an "e". E-governance can range from simple Web sites that convey basic information to complex sites that transform the customary ways of delivering all sorts of government services. In this respect local e-government is the form of e-governance that specifically focuses on the online delivery of suitable local services by local authorities.

In practice local e-government reflects four dimensions, each one dealing with the functions of government itself. The four are: (a) *e-services,* the electronic delivery of government information, programs, and services often over the Internet; (b) *e-management,* the use of information technology to improve the management of government. This might range from streamlining business processes to improving the flow of information within government departments; (c) *e-democracy* the use of electronic communication vehicles, such as e-mail and the Internet, to increase citizen participation in the public decision-making process; (d) *e-commerce,* the exchange of money for goods and services over the Internet which might include citizens paying taxes and utility bills, renewing vehicle registrations, and paying for recreation programs, or government buying office supplies and auctioning surplus equipment (Cook, LaVigne, Pagano, Dawes, & Pardo, 2002).

Commensurate with the rapid increase in the process of developing e-governance tools, there has been an increased interest in benchmarking the process of local e-governance. This benchmarking, which includes the processes involved in e-governance as well as the extent of e-governance adoption or take-up is important as it allows for improved processes and enables government agencies to move towards world best practice. It is within this context that this article discusses benchmarking local e-government. It brings together a number of discussions regarding the significance of benchmarking, best practices and actions for local e-government, and key elements of a successful local e-government project.

BACKGROUND

Local e-governance is like other advancements involving the use of ICTs. It is seen as somewhat of a revolution, with many researchers considering e-governance as part of a new vision of local government for the 21st century (Jones & Crowe, 2001; Kearns, Bend, & Stern, 2002; Lenk & Traunmuller, 2002; Macintosh, Malina, & Whyte, 2002; OECD, 2001; Pardo, 2000; Socitim & IDeA, 2002). The definitions of local e-governance differ but read something along the lines of "the use of ICTs by local councils to enhance the access to and delivery of local services to benefit citizens, business partners, and employees" (VanDermeer & VanWinden, 2003: pp. 411), and tend to include those activities such as the type referred to above. According to Mahizhnan and Andiappan (2002, p. 1), local e-governance means more than simply technologizing government.

It requires a fundamental rethinking of governance itself and ... a re-inventing of local government ... e-government re-examines the organizing principles of bureaucracy and governance, re-defines the objectives and deliverables of local government and re-deploys the resources available.

The history of local e-government technology applications goes back to the 1990s, to the early days of the Internet. For example in UK, e-government efforts started in November 1996 with the publication of the "Government Direct Green Paper" (Government Direct: A prospectus for the Electronic Delivery of Government Services), outlining the way in which Government might make fuller use of ICTs within Government departments (including local councils) and in its dealings with citizens and busi-

nesses. Publication of the first version of the "e-Government Interoperability Framework (e-GIF)" in October 2000 set out national and local governments' technical policies and standards for achieving interoperability and information systems integration across the public sector. In particular, it adopts XML (extensible markup language) as the primary standard for data integration and presentation on all public sector systems. It also defined the essential pre-requisite for joined-up and Web enabled government, the e-GIF is a cornerstone in the overall e-government strategy. And the launch of the "UKonline.gov.uk" citizen portal, the "one-stop shop" for electronic public services for citizens in December 2000 was one of the most important steps of establishing e-government for UK (IDGES, 2005) (see Relyea & Hogue, 2004 for more information on the history of e-government).

As local e-government practices are becoming more wide spread, governments have realized the significance of developing standards and benchmarking local e-government. The benchmarking efforts and developed standards are working as a visionary guide for federal, state, and local government authorities to adopt ICTs for their e-governance practice.

Benchmarking Local E-Government

Benchmarking can be described as the process of searching for, and achieving, excellent levels of performance. This is achieved through a systematic comparison of performance and processes in different organizations, or between different parts of a single organization, to learn how to do things better. Its purpose is continuous improvement in levels of performance, by identifying where changes can be made in what is done, or the way in which things are done (CIPFA, 1996). The effective use of benchmarking can lead organizations to a best value.

Benchmarking of e-government projects, special local government procedures, as well as technical operations (e.g., data exchange formats) will result in uniform best-practice solutions. This will also prevent redundant developments, thus enabling a considerable increase in the economic efficiency of local e-government.

Benchmarking of e-governance practices and processes has tended to take two forms. There are those who have attempted to benchmark the readiness of societies and local councils to adopt e-governance (Yigitcanlar, 2003) and those who have looked at the e-governance tools and content (Mahizhnan & Andiappan, 2002). The former is aptly illustrated in the United Nation's Online Network in Public Administration and Finance's global e-governance readiness report (www.unpan.org/egovernment4.asp). That report, released in 2004, pre-

sents an index ranking of the countries of the world according to two primary indicators: (a) the state of national and local e-governments' readiness; and (b) the extent of e-participation. Countries including the United States, Denmark, and Sweden score highly on the e-government readiness index, while the UK, the United States, Canada, and Singapore score highly on the e-governance participation index.

Reflected in this index of e-governance "readiness" is the suggestion that in developing a comprehensive set of e-governance tools societies pass through several stages. Four stages have been suggested: emerging, enhanced, interactive, transactional, and seamless. *Emerging* is when a local government Web presence is established through a few independent official sites and information is limited, basic, and static. *Enhanced* is when the content and information is updated with greater regularity. *Interactive* is when users can download forms, contact local council officials, and make appointments and requests. *Transactional* is when users can actually pay for services or conduct financial transactions online. *Seamless* is when total integration of e-functions and services across administrative and departmental boundaries takes place.

As of 2001, 88% of the UN Member States have made a legitimate effort to commit to some form of national and local e-government; that is 169 countries have an established online presence with official government Web sites. However, for over a quarter of the countries, the content of official Web sites consisted of static and insufficient information often of a public relations nature and consistently with strong political overtones. Such sites can hardly be described as service delivery or considered citizen-centric since they are not a medium to elicit useful feedback (UN, 2002). Although there are different stages of e-government, some of the countries' e-government schemes did not fit in any of them.

Benchmarking of the processes and content of local e-governance is often of more importance as this aids government departments in building world class e-governance presence and is often associated with best practice examples. The process of benchmarking can involve several steps, but the key factors that appear to be critical to the effective use of benchmarking can be summarized as follows (IDeA, 2004):

- Developing an organization's capacity to learn from other operators in the field or market, or from others who have carried out a similar service or thematic best value review,
- Orientating an organization's future to be open to new ideas on how to do things,
- Effectively and routinely collecting service and process data to enable valid comparisons to be made,

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