

Chapter 1

Theoretical Foundation

ABSTRACT

This chapter traces the evolution of reinventing government of the 1990s to public service delivery in the digital era. It illustrates that public service delivery in the digital era is a means of addressing a long-standing reform agenda not only to increase efficiency but also to influence the way decisions are made. It shows how technology has become a formidable enabler for networked governance bringing together concepts of privatization, public-private partnership, and contracting as a workable solution to many of the government large applications systems concerns, thus making possible the virtual state. This has enabled the citizen to participate in the agenda setting of government. However, the digital era poses important civil liberty concerns related to citizen identification and identity management amongst other privacy related issues. The focus is the need for management to seek a continuous process of using technology to transform their entity into one that truly places the customer as the centre of attention for achieving a customer-oriented environment.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership must come from all of us - the private, public, and civil sectors. Eric Lowitt, Author

Public Service delivery in the digital era is all about bringing together the innovative ideas from various stakeholders in the private, public, and civil sectors to meet customer expectations in every segment. This is not an easy task, but technology is the greatest facilitator for making this to happen. The digital era with all its connectivity implications is a catalytic force that will allow the various stakeholders to work together in bringing about change in the way Government operates and relates to its cliental. The key objective of this Chapter is to outline the evolution of public service delivery in the digital era by tracing the progress from the concept of reinventing government in the 1990s to the current digital era; the development and growth of the Virtual State; the occurrence of the second wave of digital era governance and public service delivery; the materialization of civil liberties issues in the digital era; and the mounting focus on customer needs and expectations.

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BACKGROUND

A consequence of Public Service delivery in the digital era is the reinvention of Government, it offers public administration practitioners and academics alike the challenge to promote three fundamental principles, namely, that the citizen becomes the central focus in designing government service delivery; that society moves towards embracing the values of catalytic government and community ownership; and that public officials are motivated to think about how to empower citizens to take ownership of community problems by urging them to partner with citizen groups and non-profit organisations to identify solutions and deliver public services effectively. The integration of these principles with the application of information communications technology (ICT) provides the basis for two essential concepts in modern day government, namely eGovernment and eGovernance, including the use of mobile telephony, known as mGovernment and mGovernance.

ICT is basically about technologies that give access to information through telecommunications, such as the Internet, wireless networks, cell phones, and other communication channels. This allows people to communicate with others at anytime from anywhere, irrespective of the time and distance, using technologies such as voice, video-conferencing and instant messaging. Hence, ICT facilitates the application of eGovernment (electronic Government) and mGovernment (mobile Government using mobile phones) that use electronic communications devices, such as computers and the Internet to provide public services to citizens and other persons in a country or region. Therefore, citizens and businesses can lodge for example taxation returns and make payments at anytime from anywhere without the need for them to be physically present in a government office. Whilst the focus of eGovernment (and mGovernment) is on prompt service delivery and convenience, eGovernance (and mGovernance) offers a technology-mediated link between citizens and their governments to reflect over civic communication, policy evolution, and the democratic expression of the citizens' will. Thus, allowing them to actively participate in the formulation of government policies. This denotes a major challenge for all those who are involved with public administration.

This book provides an opportunity to examine issues related to Public Service delivery in the digital era to see whether ICT has achieved a significant paradigm shift in public service delivery and the political process; the extent that governments have taken advantage of the transformational potential of ICT and moved towards seamless government; the degree that governments are taking advantage of the interactive features of the World Wide Web to improve service delivery, democratic responsiveness, and public outreach; and the long-term consequences of electronic government for service delivery, democratic responsiveness, and public attitudes.

FROM REINVENTING GOVERNMENT TO THE CURRENT DIGITAL ERA

In 1992, David Osborne and Ted Gaebler published their book, entitled *Reinventing Government*. Their work provided a new terminology of change in the public sector that conveyed an optimistic message about the change their idea may bring about. However, it must be recognised that reinvention has a historical context in that reform initiatives in the Public Service are really a part of a reform agenda that goes back at least three decades. Richard Heeks in his book, *Reinventing Government in the Information Age - International Practice in IT-Enabled Public Sector Reform*, claims that *Reinventing Government*

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