

Chapter 24

E-Government's Role in Shifting the Paradigm of Performance in the Public Sector

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of e-government changed the world of the Public Administration (PA) and the discipline of Public Management dramatically. Through the presentation of a case- study of the municipality of Palermo, this article attempts to discuss the renewed need for assessing performance of e-government services in a local government and to disclose the main critical issues in accomplishing this evaluation. Palermo is experiencing the implementation of a second- generation e-government project that is embodied in the realization of a web portal. The conceptualization of a framework to assess the performance of the digital services appears to be crucial in order to improve the system and to avoid the errors of the first project. This work relies on a survey to the citizens and semi-structured interviews to managers in charge of the development of the project. System Dynamics, a particular kind of dynamic simulation, is used to provide the necessary feedback structure for identifying the determinants of the success of the portal.

INTRODUCTION

This article attempts to discuss the renewed need for assessing performance of e-government services in a local government and to disclose the main critical issues in accomplishing this evaluation. Assessing e-government is no more a matter of defining the maturity of the digital system in object (e.g. a web portal of a public institution); it is now a matter of what is the delivered value to the user and the gained efficiency and effectiveness of the Public Administration. The task is not easy because of all the immaterial values involved. Nonetheless it is important to capture the feedbacks underlying a given e-government system.

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Being already accepted that performance (especially in the public sector) must include both an internal and an external assessment, this work proposes a dynamic approach that results in a dynamic simulation model. The model reconciles the process of implementation, or administration's perspective, with the process of adoption, or users' perspective.

On the implementation side, the focus must be placed on the consequence of introducing the digital channel for delivering institutional services. It is not just a matter of technological innovation; it is a radical change of the paradigm of public management. This change implies the need to reshape the roles inside the administration, need that is likely to generate a diffused cultural resistance among the employees.

On the adoption side, what appeared clear from the beginning of the research was the empirical evidence that the municipality of Palermo must overcome two major challenges (which were identified thanks to an online survey of 389 respondent citizens) in order to encourage the adoption of e-services by citizens. They are the lack of a real awareness of the e-services provided by the municipal administration and the perceived lack of a substantial relative advantage in using the digital channels in place of the traditional ones.

The study of the adoption of e-government cannot be separated from its implementation in the specific territorial context. Therefore, after providing the necessary background literature and after a quick presentation of the case- study, System Dynamics, a particular kind of dynamic simulation, is used to provide the necessary feedback structure in order to build an integrated perspective of users and Public Administration together and to design alternative policies to improve the system. Through the analysis of the case- study, this paper will attempt to answer the following research question: What are the major criticalities encountered when applying performance management tools to e-Government projects?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND PROPOSED FRAMEWORK

Measuring public performance is widely recognized as a crucial activity in order to assure a satisfactory service to citizens and all the other stakeholders. The need for performance measurement dates back to the beginning of the last century and the demand for reporting performance is even growing while lack of public resources becomes the main issue to solve.

First of all, reporting the effect of past policies is necessary to decision makers to improve their strategies, what is called "information use" of performance measurement (Bernstein D.J., 2014). Other specific applications are: reporting performance as a tool of accountability and transparency towards citizens, testing new procedures or equipment, contract monitoring, supporting planning and budgeting systems and program evaluation (Ammons, 2008; Ewoh, 2011).

Public performance measurement is *the use of quantifiable data to periodically examine the results and efficiency of public programs* (Ewoh A., 2011). Of course, the objectives of public governance are not comparable to the ones of a private institution. The focus is shifted on the value released more than on the monetary return for that value. This concept is included in the *public value paradigm* theorized by Moore (1995). Moore was mainly concerned with creating a normative theory of what public managers should do to create public value given the particular circumstances they are immersed in (Cordella & Bonina, 2012).

The adjective "quantifiable" in Ewoh's definition, however, suggests that the measurement task is uneasy due to the strong intangible nature of many public activities and e-government is one of those activities.

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