

Chapter XV

E-Government Implementation in Oman: A Preliminary Investigation

Moaman Al-Busaidy
Brunel University, UK

Vishanth Weerakkody
Brunel University, UK

ABSTRACT

With the advancement of the Internet and supporting information and communication technologies, e-government has emerged as an effective means of delivering government services to citizens. In the recent past, e-government has become popular in many developing countries. Most notably are the Middle Eastern countries that have continued to invest significantly into e-government initiatives in the last five years. The aim of this chapter is to examine e-government activities in the Sultanate of Oman and to identify factors that are currently impeding e-government development and implementation in this country. While issues such as lack of legal frameworks, strategy, project plans, usability issues and information quality are identified in the published literature as impeding e-government progress in Oman, this research suggests that factors such as web accessibility and integration of various government agencies also pose a major challenge for e-government implementation in Oman.

1. INTRODUCTION

While commercial enterprises have been exploiting the business opportunities offered by the Internet for some time by engaging in e-business activities, public sector organizations have until recently failed to capitalize on the potential ben-

efits of e-enabling their services. However, this notion is now beginning to change with many governments initiating e-government projects with a view of offering better and more accessible services to citizens. This shift has been facilitated largely as a result of the availability of innovative and cost effective ICT solutions and the evolution

of the Internet. While developed countries have exploited the power of the Internet to successfully e-enable public services and entice citizens, developing countries have been comparatively slow in developing successful e-government strategies (Karunanada and Weerakkody, 2006; Weerakkody et al., 2007) .

With the number of e-government initiatives increasing from three in 1996 to over five hundred national initiatives (Al-Kibsi *et al.*, 2001), the benefits of e-government have been highlighted by many researchers. Given that the public sector is often classified as bureaucratic, inefficient and less technology savvy, e-government can be considered as a revolution that was waiting to happen, particularly in a developing country context. Given this context, e-government has the potential to radically change public sector agencies and offer many benefits that were previously not envisaged (Moulder, 2001).

E-government is the short form for electronic government, and it is also referred to as digital government, online government and even transformational government (Riley, 2003). E-government discusses the manner in which governments make use of the exchange of information and services that are pertinent with regards to citizens, individual businesses, and other governmental agencies to name a few (Welch, 2005). When e-government is implemented successfully, it will ensure that there is improvement in processes within government agencies, efficiency is achieved, and public services are better managed and delivered (Riley, 2003).

However, for e-government implementation to be widespread and successful, exemplary strategies and practices need to be identified in addition to establishing and prioritizing processes to be e-enabled. Furthermore, every e-government programme needs to have a clear idea of the proposed benefits to citizens, what challenges need to be overcome and the level of institutional change that needs to take place for it to be successful in a given context (Hazlett and Hill., 2003).

While many developed countries have identified successful strategies and overcome obstacles to pioneer the e-government concept (Jones, 2007), developing countries such as Oman have much to learn in this context. However, there has been little research done to examine, for instance, the reasons for the lack of progress since the initiation of the national e-government project in Oman in 2003. Moreover, there is very little published literature (apart from UN reports) that identifies the issues impeding e-government efforts in Oman. This chapter aims to examine key issues that are currently influencing the implementation of e-government in Oman.

In order to achieve the aforementioned aim, the chapter is structured as follows. The next section briefly examines the benefits and challenges of e-government as published in the literature. This is followed by a brief overview of Oman and e-government implementation efforts in that country in section three. Next, a brief overview of the research approach used for this study is offered. In section five, a preliminary case study of e-government implementation in Oman is offered. The chapter then concludes by discussing the most salient issues currently influencing e-government implementation in Oman.

2. E-GOVERNMENT BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES: A LITERATURE PERSPECTIVE

The purpose of e-government according to Kostopoulos (2003) is to build a digital state where public services and information can be offered to citizens electronically. Choudrie et al., (2004) suggests that e-government has the potential to improve external and internal relationships among the various stakeholders involved in the government services delivery process (including citizens, government employees, external businesses etc) and facilitate sharing of knowledge among these stakeholders. For many governments, particularly

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