

Electronic Government in the Digital Society
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Let us first be clear about what we mean by e-Government. It means more than just adding an “e” to government. It means more that setting up a website to publish information or investing in the latest laptops for public officers. E-Government requires reinventing government in all of its aspects, re-examining all aspects of governance, and being prepared to “creatively destroy” rules and regulations that are no longer relevant in the Digital Economy. Without a fundamental transformation in governmental internal processes and in the governmental service delivery to the public, both individuals and businesses, no government can become an effective e-Government.

Globalization and the rapid pace of developments in information and communication (infocomm) technologies have brought about fundamental transformations in business processes and relationships. These technological changes will also redefine the nature of government and its relationship with citizens. Public services of many countries face the challenge of re-inventing government in the Digital Economy. This transformation of government and governance cuts across all aspects of the public sector from leadership, delivery of electronic public services, internal government operations, and ultimately economic competitiveness. It requires the establishment of an e-Government, one that recognizes the impact of infocomm technologies on governance in the Digital Economy and exploits these technologies in the workplace and in internal processes for the delivery of citizen-centric public services.

In the economic practice **e-Government** is defined as informational interaction between state-run public authorities and society with the use of information and computer technologies. For instance, Singapore has developed an Internet portal called eCitizen. Other countries are developing or offering similar services, for example e-Citizen, e-Business, and e-Government in the United States.

As a leader in e-Government services, Singapore has developed and implemented a working model of what e-Government should contain. Parts of this model are being adopted in various forms by governments around the world. The main programs are:

1. *Knowledge-Based Workplace*: Public servants at all levels must be infocomm literate and tap the power of infocomm technology to improve work processes, service delivery and teamwork.
2. *Electronic Services Delivery*: All public services which are suitable for electronic delivery or can tap electronic channels to improve service delivery, should be re-engineered accordingly.
3. *Technology Experimentation*: This will enhance governments’ capability to adapt to rapidly changing infocomm trends and reduce the probability of committing large investments in the wrong decisions.
4. *Operational Efficiency Improvement*: Up-to-date hardware, work engines, and data processing form the backbone of an efficient and effective public sector.
5. *Adaptive and Robust Infocomm Infrastructure*: The rapid convergence of telecommunications, broadcasting, and information technology has opened up possibilities for a networked government at a lower cost. A well-designed, reliable, and scalable infrastructure is critical for supporting e-Government initiatives.
6. *Infocomm Education*: Infocomm education programs will go beyond learning about systems and applications to harnessing infocomm technologies to improve work processes and service delivery.

A strategic framework developed by Singapore allows all government agencies to align to the e-Government vision. The strategic framework is built upon three main components:

Government and Citizens (G-to-C), Government and Businesses (G-to-B), and Government and Employees (G-to-E). The G-to-C and G-to-B components center around the public (individuals and businesses). In all the programs and projects that government embarks on, its agencies need to retain the focus on meeting the needs of the public, whether it is in policy formulation or service delivery. This necessitates re-thinking the way governments have been dealing with citizens and businesses, re-engineering their work processes and as well as enabling greater cross-agency collaboration to deliver services in a way which the public appreciates. To be successful in policy implementation and service delivery, the framework also places an emphasis on public-sector employees (G-to-E) to ensure that government derives the best out of them so as to meet the challenges of the new economy.

Finally, successful realization requires considerable co-ordination at all levels of the public service, as there will be technology and mindset changes throughout its implementation. A governance and management structure needs to drive the public sector forward in embracing e-Government, viewing public servants as partners rather than competitors.

Strategic Objectives

Looking at theory a bit more, we can specify several strategic thrusts for e-Government activities, aspects vital to achieving success:

1. *Re-inventing Government.* The public sector should systematically cultivate a better understanding of the impact of infocomm technologies to make meaningful decisions in all aspects of governance and to continually innovate to harness the benefits of infocomm technologies in its public services.
2. *Delivering Integrated Electronic Services.* Citizens should be able to access more and more public services, delivered online, anytime, anywhere. The public sector should provide the catalyst to create an e-based society in the digital economy by creating electronic services that are integrated and customer-centric. The government should put more services on-line, in tandem with advances in IT.
3. *Being Proactive and Responsive.* The public sector should adopt a “sense and respond” approach to anticipating new trends. Systems and services should be delivered at “Internet speed” and continuously fine-tuned to respond to customer needs and feedback. The public sector should anticipate and set the trend, harnessing the power of infocomm technology to enhance policy delivery, simplify regulations, and improve service levels.
4. *Using Infocomm Technologies to Build New Capabilities and Capacities.* The public sector should go beyond simply using infocomm technologies as a system, by continually innovating and adapting business and operational processes to radically re-engineer and totally transform operations. Infocomm technologies offer tremendous opportunities to create new value, to tap the power of collaborative knowledge management, and to provide instant knowledge and processing capability to make quantum leaps in service delivery.
5. *Innovating with Infocomm Technologies.* The public sector should go beyond tried and tested ways of deploying technology. The government should experiment with new technologies, with a view to learning and developing capability, and being in a situation where there is nobody else to learn or copy from, simply because it is the first one there. Its procurement and project management approach should also be flexible or nimble enough to avoid deploying obsolete technology, and remain practical and pragmatic.

So, measured against these benchmarks, how do actual governments stack up?

Singapore. Without question, Singapore is leading the way with its e-Government Action Plan and forward-looking, service-oriented planning. Singaporean public servants have a desire to lead the way to making their nation the world’s first “intelligent island.” The government ambition, then, is to deliver services which the public cares about. This means services

of a quality which the public will be unhappy to lose. e-Government will enable significantly higher levels of *C.A.R.E* in delivery of public services: *Courtesy*: With e-Government, this means providing services in the most customer-centric and user-friendly way possible, reducing the amount of time and effort to find and obtain service, especially when the service involves multiple agencies. *Accessibility*: This means providing customers with convenient and easy access to electronic services, whether from their homes or through community facilities, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. *Responsiveness*: This means services delivered in good time with minimal red-tape. With customer feedback, new services can be developed and existing ones improved. *Effectiveness*: This means effectively meeting the public need, and not creating further problems in the process. Services delivered electronically must be secure and reliable.

United States. The United States, though traditionally considered a leader in technological fields and innovation, has ironically gotten off to a slow start. The events of Sept. 11, 2001, provide additional impetus for much talk about e-Government, but in practice much of the discussion remains words and plans. In the past few months several progressive steps have been made toward enhancing e-Government services, for example, a useful simplification and expansion of the IRS e-file system. The much-touted e-Government portal FirstGov.gov is primarily a collection of links to various independent agency sites and pages, though major improvements are promised as this article goes to press.

President George Bush's 2002 budget included \$100 million for an e-Government fund. "By enabling individuals to penetrate the Federal bureaucracy to access information and transact business, the Internet promises to shift power from a handful of leaders in Washington to individual citizens," Bush's budget plan states. A recent survey of more than 1,500 local governments found that while more than 80 percent have Web sites, the majority lack an e-Government strategy like the one Bush proposed. Only 9 percent of the local governments said they have a master plan to provide services and information over the Internet, though more than half said they plan to develop one within the next year. The biggest barrier to implementing e-Government Web sites was a lack of technology, Web staff, and of course, funding. Bush's proposed \$100 million should go a long way in aiding the e-Government effort.

Russia. Russia continues to talk up grand e-Government modernization plans, but remains entrenched in immovable bureaucracy. The problem is complicated by low rates of citizen access to the services, especially in regions outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg. The federal project "Electronic Russia" outlines numerous futuristic dreams, yet implementation and funding are woefully lacking. Providing electronic services to diverse residents spread across eleven time zones is proving to be a difficult task. Unlike Singapore, where short distances allow infrastructure to rapidly be deployed and modernized, Russia is faced with mammoth expanses separating large segments of the population from each other.

Future. The world is watching developments in Singapore, the U.S., the U.K, Canada, Australia, and other countries. But to watch is to lag behind. Singapore, with a service-centered mentality being built into every level of e-Government, is the leader in the early phases of e-Government. The terms of the field, as well as the boundaries themselves, are constantly being defined and redefined innovatively. The frontiers of e-Government are still open, and any country daring enough to blaze a new trail will undoubtedly be remembered for generations to come.

Selected e-Government Service Sites:

Singapore: <http://eCitizen.gov.sg/> United States: <http://www.firstgov.gov/>
Russia: <http://www.russia-gateway.ru/> UK: <http://www.ukonline.gov.uk/>
Canada: <http://www.canada.gc.ca/> Australia: <http://www.centrelink.gov.au/>