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E-government

Experiences in Chile, Canada, and Brazil
Summary Report of Best Practices Forum

DEVELOPMENT OF E-GOVERNMENT STRATEGIES IN CHILE, CANADA AND BRAZIL

BEST PRACTICES FORUM OF THE AMERICAS

SUMMARY REPORT

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Executive Summary

The **Inter-American Agency for Cooperation and Development of the Organization of American States** (IACD/OAS), with the collaboration of the Institute for Connectivity in the Americas (ICA), organized a series of E-Government Best Practices Forums in which *Chile, represented by Mr. Angel Flisfisch*, Executive Director of the Program of State Reform and Modernization, *Canada, represented by Ms. Helen McDonald*, Assistant Secretary, Office for Government On-Line and Service Strategy at the Treasury Board Secretariat, and *Brazil, represented by Mr. Rogerio Santanna*, Secretary of Logistics and Information Technology, Ministry of Planning, shared their experiences at building electronic government with high level government officials from throughout the Americas[1].

The goals of these online forums were to give OAS member states the opportunity to share lessons learned and to see what experiences were common across the countries.

In this report, we summarize the lessons learned from these forums and make recommendations based on those experiences. In doing so, we draw on transcripts of the Chile forum held on July 16, 2003, the Canada forum on August 20, 2003, and the Brazil forum on September 17, 2003 as well as global e-government research undertaken at Brown University in the United States (see West, 2001, 2002, and 2003)[2]

Among the observations and recommendations made in this report include the following points:

1)   Information technology executives must work to put e-government on the national agenda and to communicate broad vision and goals throughout bureaucracy and to the public.

2)   Successful e-government requires an organizational infrastructure with a clear leader such as a CIO or cabinet or department head who can commit financial capital and communicate specific progress to the public, media, and other government officials.

3)   There need to be effective procedures for consultation across government agencies such that individual bureaucrats "buy" into change.

4)   Focusing on low-cost, high return investments helps build public support for e-government.

5)   A non-partisan approach to e-government helps to overcome barriers to institutional change.

6)   Political will and support are more crucial to e-government than passing new laws.

7)   Legal action is required to address ambiguous aspects of virtual crimes, privacy and security, and digital signatures.

8)   Early demonstration projects can help build public and government support for other e-government priorities.

9)   The initial phase of e-government generally does not result in cost savings because in the short-run, governments have to maintain parallel paper and electronic delivery systems.

10) Communicating the benefits of e-government is crucial to securing necessary public funding.

11) Public-private sector alliances can be helpful in promulgating e-government, although this varies from country to country.

12) It is important for public sector agencies to attract skilled information technology professionals to maintain e-government activities.

13) Effective oversight of e-government activities is important to build broader confidence in technology.

14) There should be effective accountability in terms of the development and maintenance of government websites.

15) Following international standards on privacy and security should be a high priority for government agencies.

16) Public participation and public feedback are crucial for e-government development.

17) Enhancing public accessibility should be a top priority for government websites.

18) Having consistent website design makes it easier for the public to access e-government.

19) Advertising e-government information and services helps to alert the public to what is available on government websites.

Building Successful E-Government

Electronic government still is in its early stages in many nations. According to recent statistics reported on global e-government, 16 percent of government websites for the 198 nations around the world have fully executable online services, 89 percent have online publications, 73 percent provide links to databases, 14 percent offer some form of disability access, 12 percent show privacy policies, and 6 percent present security policies (see West, 2003).

In discussing their own experiences with e-government, representatives from Chile, Canada, and Brazil agreed on several requisites for building successful e-government. The legitimizing and prioritizing of e-government initiatives from the highest authority in government is that which is most imperative. Generation of political will has been directly attributed to clear signals of support from the executives of all three countries. It is up to leaders to maintain the presence of e-government on the national agenda in order for sustained progress to take place.

The need for widespread communication of mission and vision for e-government was noted by the representatives of all three nations. Mr. Flisfisch, pointed out that in Chile, the political will has been achieved through the emission of clear messages of support from the highest authority in the government: the President. Ms. Helen McDonald, noted the necessity of repeating a clear message over time in order to fully disseminate e-government as a priority, especially in the minds of ministers and other government workers. The creation of specific committees and a Chief Information Officer (CIO) helps to emphasize the importance of e-government.

Hiring change-oriented, capable individuals to work within the public sector to execute the initial and day-to-day logistics of e-government is more important here than in other areas of government bureaucracy. Though there was some dissension over the need for prior training of individuals between the small and larger countries that individuals not politicize e-government activities was identified as a crucial element of maintaining the integrity of this new mechanism of democratic service delivery. Sustained motivation of employees working directly and indirectly on the electronic infrastructure again reverts to the clear dissemination of the vision and goals associated with broad initiatives.

The reinvestment of savings directly attributable to online service delivery helps to supplement other public funding for e-government initiatives. The tracking and recording of these savings, though oftentimes difficult, can aid in garnering more public support for future online initiatives. Mr. Santanna highlighted that the Brazilian government has been saving around 25% on goods and services procured through Comprasnet. Ms. McDonald noted that focusing initial forays into service delivery helped to accelerate the popularity of e-government progress, as it is this aspect that most obviously demonstrates the large-scale and long-term effects online governance can have on democracy. This certainly is not to say that preliminary steps (before fully executable service delivery) be ignored, as they too are imperative to overall success. Ms. McDonald herself noted the absolute need for safety and security and measures to instill public trust in government sites before any real change can be expected.

Based on these experiences, we recommend two things:
1) Information technology executives must work to put e-government on the national
    agenda and to communicate broad
    vision and goals throughout bureaucracy and to the public, and
2) Successful e-government requires an organizational infrastructure with a clear leader
    such as a CIO or cabinet or department head who can commit financial capital and
    communicate specific progress to the public, media, and other government officials.

Institutional Changes

There are numerous obstacles to successful e-government. Mr. Angel Flisfisch, Executive Director of the Chile Program on Reform and Modernization, noted that resistance to change experienced by many countries is oftentimes cultural. Due mostly to differences in training and capacity and in appreciation for technology, some cultures are more amenable to online government transformation than others. Canada, for example, has experienced little resistance to change, according to Ms. McDonald. Other countries have encountered more obstacles. Through discussions with all three representatives, several methods to overcome this aversion to change become apparent.

Though it is important to have the cooperation of many or all public services, governments must be careful not to convolute authority. To ensure collaboration among branches and departments, it is important to make good use of committees and invest in common tools for integrated websites. It is helpful to keep track of public opinion and focus initially on low-cost, high-return measures. The CIO must be capable, motivated, and knowledgeable of the means by which broad goals can be accomplished. This person should be non-political and focus on the policy and standards that must be implemented from a non-partisan standpoint. Positive public opinion with regard to e-government will be tainted by politicization and, perhaps not indirectly, corruption and/or scandal. The CIO must take charge of the "horizontal communication" of the mission set forth by the executive and perpetuate its dissemination through all levels of government. Enhancements to organizational culture include training, full understanding of objectives, coherent strategy, and will to change.

Canada, the largest of the three nations, has not experienced significant cultural aversion to technological change and has exhibited a unique ability to devote considerable financial resources to information technology. Ms. McDonald maintains that vision must be paralleled by financial investment. E-government initiatives—especially in the beginning—require an infusion of capital. The immediate devotion of resources to ensuring the security and safety of government websites and services is an important step towards reducing resistance to change and instilling trust in new processes. Utilization of online information and services, once widely accepted as secure, will become more universally acknowledged.

> **To summarize, there are three things necessary for institutional change:**
> 1) Effective procedures for consultation across government agencies such that individual bureaucrats "buy" into change,
> 2) Focusing on low-cost, high return investments helps to build public support for e-government, and
> 3) A non-partisan approach to e-government helps to overcome barriers to institutional change.

Legal Framework

Representatives from all three countries seemed to agree that actual legislation was not the most important aspect of developing successful e-government. Few laws were passed in any of the nations that aided in the reduction of resistance to change or the development of online service delivery.

Mr. Flisfisch noted that political will is a prerequisite to any change in the legal framework and that political support is more important than passing new laws. Argentina was noted as an example of a country that enacted pertinent legislation but lacked direction and whose resulting e-government infrastructure subsequently did not reach its full potential. No single broad legal reform can account for real e-government transformation.

Mr. Rogerio Santana Dos Santos, Secretary of Logistics and Information Technology of the Ministry of Planning of Brazil, noted that the legal structure is a *consequence*, not a requirement, of e-government. To a large extent this holds true, especially considering the revolutionary nature of the Internet and its implications for government—no legal precedent exists.

There are, however, some legal areas of e-government that must be addressed. These areas include virtual crimes, privacy and security, and digital signatures. Legal guidelines regarding these topics will help to reassure a doubtful public and instill trust in new technology. Fully executable services often require the online transmission of personal information, and governmental institutions must be legally accountable for the security of these transactions.

To assist in its e-government development, Canadian departments and agencies are staffed with lawyers from the Department of Justice to ensure that e-government measures retain a strong sense of legality. This helps to make sure that legal precedents are respected and that legal ambiguities are resolved quickly.
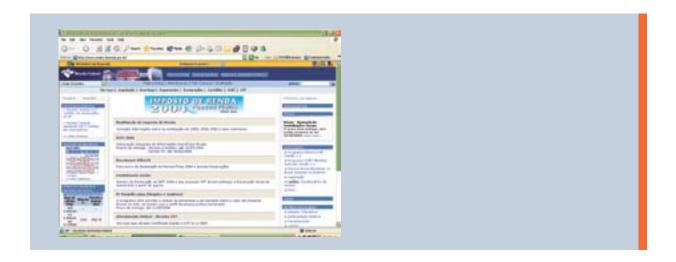
Taking these experiences into account, we suggest that:
1) Political will and support are more crucial to e-government than passing new laws, and
2) Where legal action is required is in addressing ambiguous aspects of virtual crimes, privacy and security, and digital signatures.

Financing E-Government

The funding needed to set up Internet infrastructure is never an easy amount of money for a government to allocate. Especially for countries without previous allotments for information technology, financing e-government can be problematic. Moreover, the monetary savings associated with good e-government usually cannot be reaped immediately; sustained success and investment are required to get to the stage in which fully executable services replace the costly traditional means by which such transactions otherwise take place.

In garnering support for funding, the Chilean government looked to methods employed by other countries. Communicating the benefits of good e-government became the primary way in which individuals inside and outside of government were convinced that online infrastructure merited financial commitment. Mr. Flisfisch noted the importance of knowledge of necessities and potential problems associated with the initial stages of the process. Implications of under-funding e-government must also be considered, as states that that do not meet the minimum costs of successful online governance often produce sites and services that fall short in reaching goals.

Mr. Santana Dos Santos suggested that when pressed for funding, it is important to begin with low-cost/high-return projects to generate what he calls the "demonstration effect." This essentially demonstrates to doubters that e-government effectively can cut costs. Though this principle is an ideally formidable means of helping to promote further financing, it must be noted that any online measure or service by which money can be saved itself requires a relatively significant investment. The early stages of e-government typically do not present a nation with the opportunity to cut costs through services.

In short, based on these experiences, we suggest the following points:
1) Early demonstration projects can help build public and government support for other e-government priorities,
2) The initial phase of e-government generally does not result in cost savings because in the short-run, governments have to maintain parallel paper and electronic delivery systems, and
3) Communicating the benefits of e-government is crucial to securing necessary public funding.

Public and Private Sector Alliances

In many countries, the private sector is responsible for much of Internet development and the ways in which it is used. Commercial software companies have aided in the evolution of Internet technology itself and screened the many ways in which the Internet can make life easier. The private sector, especially through its vast knowledge and expertise of the technology itself, is generally ahead of the public sector regarding Internet technology.

The discussion of how to best utilize the private sector in proliferating good e-government produces some division of opinion among the three countries. Each country seems to have an articulated, but different, opinion on the place of private sector involvement, though all agree that the private sector has much to offer governments in the process of developing an online presence. Chile views the private sector as a "great ally" in the process. Brazil has tried to encourage companies to develop open-source technology that could then be utilized by the government in establishing its online infrastructure. It has noted a void in Portuguese-language software, which limits options for Brazil. Ms. McDonald noted that in Canada, some provinces have been more aggressive than others in recruiting the private sector to form alliances in developing e-government. Nationally, Canada has utilized the private sector in implementing its security infrastructure the most.

However involved the private sector becomes in building e-government, it is necessary to hire skilled and motivated information technology (IT) professionals to maintain logistical online infrastructure. Mr. Flisfisch interestingly pointed out that it could be beneficial to hire a diverse group that includes individuals *without* IT backgrounds. He hires and keeps his best employees through organizational axioms like sense of belonging, public service spirit, professional and social recognition, and possibilities of becoming qualified.

Brazil is attempting to encourage national companies to develop open-source technology because it generates local employment, promotes less dependency on foreign suppliers, and prepares local companies to compete in the global market, according to Mr. Santana Dos Santos. He maintains that Brazil is moving towards a deeper understanding of private business and a "public/private" society.

Based on these experiences, we suggest that:
1) Public-private sector alliances can be helpful in promulgating e-government, although this varies from country to country, and
2) It is important for public sector agencies to attract skilled information technology professionals to maintain e-government activities.

Government Review Processes and Portfolio Management

Representatives from all three countries unilaterally mentioned several integral aspects of e-government technology. These include interoperability, common infrastructure, and consistent and accountable maintenance. Chile promotes a policy of simplifying transactions on technologically neutral platforms that does not necessarily exclude private sector technology. Brazil utilizes both internal and external control bodies for its government review process—outside support is welcome, according to Mr. Santana Dos Santos.

It is imperative to allocate human capital to the upkeep of sites. Links and services must be constantly updated and upgraded. Brazil has designated public entities designed to keep links active, and Canada has devised a system of accountability for these bodies to ensure the accuracy and timeliness of information.

Interoperability of technology and a common "look and feel" of websites within a government are important to increase accessibility and ease of use. Utilizing common technology and infrastructure across departments and agencies enables users to easily navigate sites and obtain the information they seek.

Ms. McDonald also specifically noted security infrastructure as a supremely important technological prerequisite to successful e-government. She maintains that this must be a priority, even for small countries, as secure sites instill trust and promote the use of online services and technology. Following international standards and sharing information, technology, and services among parts of government are also helpful, she notes.

The representatives from Chile and Brazil outlined several ways by which they manage their portfolios. One way to prioritize e-government, according to Mr. Flisfisch, is to tie it to a bigger issue. The example he gave was to "modernize and reform the government structure" as a whole. By making e-government a means by which to accomplish this goal, he is able to successfully garner support for its implementation. Mr. Santana Dos Santos emphasizes that ideally there be a centrally funded budget for e-government—the more dually centralized the message and money, the more effective e-government can be.

To summarize, we believe that:
1) Effective oversight of e-government activities is important to build broader confidence in technology,
2) There should be effective accountability in terms of the development and maintenance of government websites, and
3) Following international standards on privacy and security should be a high priority for government agencies.

Public Participation

Public participation, and its associated inequities, is an extremely important issue for all countries. How much of the citizenry, and, more specifically, what sects of the citizenry, participates in e-government is an important measure of success. In the global community today, use of the Internet often is restricted to the wealthy. Even in instances in which opportunity for use might be more widespread, it is often just the young or more educated people who regularly employ government websites to seek information or execute services. To ensure equal opportunity and universal access, governments must take serious measures to help reduce the opportunity costs of participation in e-government.

It is widely agreed that one method of increasing accessibility to the Internet and to government websites is to provide community Internet access points. Removing the prerequisite of owning a computer, essentially considered a luxury item in many countries, inherently increases the number of citizens able to access all kinds of government websites. These community access points can often be found in government-owned and -maintained buildings, like libraries or post offices.

The representatives from Chile and Canada repeatedly stressed that making all sites similar in appearance reduces some boundaries to access. Uniform homepages for sites dramatically increase the ease of use of a government's websites. Instead of adapting to a new format on a site to site basis, the user invariably prefers using a single format to access online information, databases, or services. This is especially true for citizens for whom the Internet is less accessible and who understand less some of the differences among sites, pages, and links—a common format reduces the amount of new information necessary to learn about accessing government websites. Making these uniform sites into one-stop portals is also helpful. Portals ultimately enable the user to access vast amounts of otherwise dispersed resources from one single page. Utilizing logically formatted links and search engines, these pages are gateways of accessibility for all users.

Mr. Santana Dos Santos identified another significant barrier to equal opportunity to e-government accessibility: literacy. Though it fluctuates from country to country, the mean literacy of a citizenship must correlate with the level of readability of a set of government websites. The second phase of Brazil's e-government program is "designing a way to capture and translate into virtual services and information the needs and desires of the digitally excluded population." If only the most educated members of society can easily comprehend the text of a website, increased access to computers does not translate into tangibly increased access. For e-government to be truly successful, means must be implemented to ensure that citizens can easily comprehend the links and text with which they will be bombarded upon logging onto a government site.

The most important aspect of promoting widespread access to government sites and e-services is communication. Community access points and increased readability mean little if no one knows about the services and opportunities available online. Ms. McDonald noted that Canada has worked to advertise its websites through avenues like television, radio, and printed brochures. Canada is also taking important steps to become aware of how many and what groups of people are logging onto its websites. Ms. McDonald noted that her e-government team regularly undertakes an extensive array of citizen surveys and polls in order to best identify needs of citizens regarding access to government portals and services.

Based on these experiences, we suggest the following:
1) Public participation and public feedback are crucial for e-government development,
2) Enhancing public accessibility should be a top priority for government websites,
3) Having consistent website design makes it easier for the public to access
   e-government, and
4) advertising e-government information and services helps to alert the public to what is
   available on government websites.

Conclusion

When looking at the e-government experiences of Chile, Canada, and Brazil, there are a number of features that are common to each country. These countries appear to have placed a similar emphasis on developing a professional and non-partisan approach to information technology. They see having a chief information officer or a cabinet or department head as being vital to building successful e-government. They caution that cost savings arising from the early phase of e-government generally are limited and that in order to build long-run support, countries should develop low-cost, high-return demonstration projects.

However, differences in funding rates, alliances between the public and private sectors, and amenability to technology across the various countries remain. Chile, Canada, and Brazil differ in size, budget resources, and cultural traditions. These factors affect the manner in which e-government is developed and the particular way in which each country has chosen its e-government path.

One of the virtues of online forums is that they allow OAS member states to share experiences across countries. By seeing where their efforts have worked and where their experiences have differed, these types of online forums help to promote greater awareness of the opportunities and problems associated with information technology. Virtual conferences allow the various countries to share the lessons learned so that not every country has to re-invent the wheel.

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