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A Case Study of Online Public Service Delivery

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Abstract

Governments around the world are facing the challenge of responding to increased expectations by their customers with regard to public service delivery. Citizens, for example, expect governments to provide better and more efficient electronic services on the Web in an integrated way. Online portals have become the approach of choice in online service delivery to meet these requirements and become more customer-focussed. This study describes and analyses existing variants of online service delivery models based upon an empirical study and provides valuable insights for researchers and practitioners in government. For this study, we have conducted interviews with senior management representatives from five international governments. Based on our findings, we distinguish three different classes of service delivery models. We describe and characterise eachof these models in detail and provide an in-depth discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches.

Keywords
Online service delivery models, e-government, electronic government, one-stop portals

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays the need for efficient, cost effective processes and increased focus on customer satisfaction is no longer only applicable in the private sector; also the public sector faces similar challenges. As part of dealing with these needs governments all over the world rely more and more on information and communication technology to deliver an increasing number of their services electronically. These activities can be subsumed under the term e-government.
Before the Internet emerged in the late 1980s, the focus of e-government was primarily on operational efficiency from an internal and managerial perspective. In this era, computers and local networks were installed to enhance internal communication without a noteworthy customer-orientation. It was the time, in which standardisation, departmentalisation and operational cost-efficiency were emphasised – labelled by Ho as the traditional bureaucratic paradigm. In the following, the first public services that were offered to citizens and businesses over the Internet mirrored the internal structure of the specific government. Each department offered their services independently from the online offerings of other departments. This led in some cases to a proliferation ofredundant services as well as an

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increase in customer dissatisfaction as citizens needed to know the internalstructure of the government in order to find the services they required and had to be aware of which services existed in the first place to fulfil their demand.
These disadvantages of traditional online service delivery models are the primary reasons why governments all over the world have started to investigate the use of one-stop online portals (OSPs). These portals commonly apply the single window concept, i.e. they offer a single point of access to electronic services and information provided by different public authorities or even private service providers. Nevertheless, for the foreseeable future, governments will always also have to provide traditional ways for citizens to fulfil their obligations and business with public administrations.
In order to provide citizens with a not only easy to use, but also comprehensive view on the services they need, OSPs have to provide customer-oriented structures of public services independent of the fragmented structure of public administrations that deliver them. For example, life events and business situations serve as metaphors for structuring online public services from a customer's point of view so that he/she does not need to know about the actual functional fragmentation in the public sector. Therefore, a smooth integration of the external, customer oriented and the internal, public administration-oriented view is needed . Although the emergence of OSPs for e-government services has been discussed for about a decade, the target state of integrated, virtual administrations offering a single portal for all public services has been achieved by only few jurisdictions.

This paper describes our research related to an analysis of the status-quo of different online service delivery models used for the provision of OSPs in a government context. The research is embedded in a study that was conducted in Shimla District, within Himachal Pradesh Administrative ReformDepartment, which is responsible for delivering all government services to its customers. This department currently investigates the benefits and required implementation steps to get from the bureaucratic model to an integrated delivery model via a seamless, whole-of-government one-stop portal in order to evolve their maturity of online service delivery. Thus, the main objective was to learn from governments that are already regarded as having reached one of the highest forms of evolution in their e-government efforts. As part of this research we conducted case studies with different departments to analyse their specific online service delivery models. We included resources of evidence in our analysis: focused individual interviews with senior representatives of the jurisdictions (primary method), documentary information provided by the representatives, and direct examination of the jurisdictions' online portals. Next to providing insights into the different cases, we will present a classification framework for the online service delivery models we encountered that is based on existing academic frameworks and concepts related to e-government. Furthermore, other governments can gain interesting insights into practices of the leading governments in regard to e-government and potentially adjust and improve their processes accordingly.

RELATED STUDY

Implementing a one-stop portal is not a simple technological change. Its designers have also to deal with many organisational issues and challenges. Such web-based IT projects often go against the tradition of hierarchical structures and vertical decision making in government organisations leading to fundamental transformations within and across these organisations.

In order to cope with these challenges, government organisations are seeking for best or good practices they can adopt. Governments can refer to a multitude of sources that give

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advice on how to set up web-based e-government projects and how to design the service delivery model. As we aim at giving advice to our state government partner how they should implement and organise their desired OSP, our research also touches upon the multiple existing contributions within the academic body of knowledge.

First, there are contributions like case narratives and success stories that describe examples of one-stop portal implementations, successful transformation projects in government in general and reflections of lessons learned. For instance cases from developed countries like Switzerland and the US in which governments conducted web-based IT projects gives examples of how governments organise innovative online service delivery.

Second, maturity and/or capability assessment models give normative advice how to improve e government capabilities. Maturity models outline anticipated, typical, logical, and desired evolution paths towards maturity.The model provided by the United Nations (2008) is another option to classify a government's maturity in regard to e-government. This model differentiates five different levels of maturity regarding e-government evolution, namely Emerging, Enhanced, Interactive, Transactional and Connected. Here, the transition to the last stage is expected to be the most complex one as coordination and collaboration issues increase considerably when integrating services horizontally (across different departmental functions on the same level of government) and vertically (across different levels of government).

Third, international benchmarking studies that compare and analyse multiple international jurisdictions with respect to their e-government efforts can give hints on good or best practices in service delivery model design.

The following represent three major international benchmarking studies:

- *Accenture (a global management consulting company) has analysed 20+ countries regarding their e-government efforts on a yearly basis starting in 2000 (the latest report can be found here: (Accenture2009).*
- *Brown University (Prof. West and his team) conducted annual e-government studies starting in 2001 (the latest report can be found here: (West 2008).*
- *The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs assessed the readiness of its nations regarding e-government starting in 2002 (the latest report can be found here: (United Nations 2010).*

All three studies are primarily concerned with comparing the performance of different governments' e-government efforts based on some indicators or metrics in order to rank them. They hardly give precise advice on how to reach good or better performance.

Finally, taxonomies of service delivery approaches can help to clarify which options a particular government organisation has or should pursue. For instance, different types of single-window approaches according to the two dimensions purpose and structure. Regarding purpose, a single-window initiative can serve to (1) improve accessibility through "gateways", (2) improve convenience through "one-stop shopping", and (3) overcome jurisdictional divisions through "seamless service". These purposes are complementary and

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should not be considered mutually exclusive. Concerning structure, Bent et al. (1999) distinguish between six delivery modes, which can be (I) owner-delivered, (II) owner-delivered in a co-located environment, (III) shared delivery through integration, (IV) delegated delivery through a corporate service utility, (V) delegated delivery through an intergovernmental service utility , and (VI) delegated delivery through another service provider (multiplexing). The owner-delivered structure stands for the direct single-window service delivery by a department or a government. Shared delivery requires multiple governments or departments to deliver services in partnership through integration. Delegated delivery means that a service utility delivers services on behalf of one or more governmental organisations. Moving along these different structures (i.e. levels of service delivery ownership) the direct involvement in service delivery of the service provider (owner) decreases. According to Bent et al. (1999), this categorisation of single-window service delivery is independent of a particular type of channel (e.g., call centres, Internet sites and information bureaus).

FINDINGS:

As primary part of the case studies was conducted on semi-structured interviews, each lasting for about an hour. This method is more flexible than, e.g., the structured interview method, as it allows for the exploration of emergent themes and ideas rather than relying only on concepts and questions defined in advance of the interview. The questions are typically asked in a similar order and format to make a form of comparison between answers possible. However, there is also scope for pursuing and probing novel, relevant information not previously covered in the interview guideline. The interview team consisted of two experienced empirical researchers, one with the role of the main interviewer and the other with a support role of note taking and further probing. The interviewers' domain knowledge and expertise with the interview method is an essential element for success in these semi-structured interviews. For extension and triangulation of the interview data, a literature review was conducted and additional (internal) documents provided by the case study partners were analysed.

The semi-structured interview protocol1 was designed and discussed amongst researchers and our case study partner to ensure the appropriateness of the questions related to the objectives of our study as well as to ensure the free flow of information based on the form and type of the questions. The questions focussed on different themes such as demographical information about the participants, internal structure of the service delivery models, experienced challenges, development and implementation steps of the one-stop portal, involvement of citizens and cultural issues. All interviews have been transcribed before data was analysed.

Regarding the selection of participating governments, we relied on convenience sampling on a selective basis. As outlined, the objectives of our local case study partner were primarily to learn from successful approaches. As such, we were provided with direct contacts form governments that were selected by our partner. Their selection aimed at covering a) case study participants with different service delivery models out of which some coincide with our partner's prospective approach, and b) case study participants that are generally known to be leading in e-government G2C service delivery, i.e. they are for instance well ranked across the country or stand out as a state government. All departments that were contacted

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agreed to participate with the incentive to receive a final report which highlights our findings.

CASE DESCRIPTIONS:

In 2011, Himachal Pradesh launched its Right to Public Service Guarantee Act including a new underlying service delivery model. In contrast to the preceding e-government model, E-district is completely government-owned and government-managed, comprises a clear brand, offers one-stop access to a wide range of services and provides these services through citizen-centric service clusters. These core attributes were regarded as crucial in order to increase customer satisfaction and take-up rate, improve internal processes, and to eventually save costs through a higher use of online services.
Other online services which are enabled for citizens are LokMitra Kendra and Sugam Centres where people visit for issuing different type of certificates and to pay different bills of daily life and office works.
In order to achieve this goal, the government realised that customers must be able to find what they are looking for and complete transactions end-to-end. This was not the case in the previous model where links were provided to an abundance of websites of the different departments.
E-DISTRICT, concept is accessible to provide all citizen services in one place. From the homepage one can start to browse through available information and services via a mixture of department based service clusters. The portal features a very consistent design, even with respect to dedicated transactional service websites such as birth certificate, for example. Also, a lot of informational content is provided right on the portal rather than linking to departmental websites. Concerning services that are delivered by lower levels of government, links are provided.
Districts are the de facto front-end of aovernment where most Government-to-Consumer or G2C interaction takes place. The e-District project was conceptualized to improve this experience and enhance the efficiencies of the various Departments at the district-level to enable seamless service delivery to the citizen.

CONCLUSION

The present study was designed to describe and discuss the current state of the practice of online service delivery models in the area of e-government. The study has shown that among the analysed cases three distinct online service delivery approaches can be distinguished based on a categorisation according to functional integration and structure. Based on the information collected from in-depth interviews and supporting documentation this paper characterised these three approaches and also discussed potential strengths and weaknesses of each model. These current findings enhance our understanding of existing practices in e-government and provide insights about the benefits and challenges of different approaches. These results will not only add to the academic body of knowledge about online service delivery in e-government but also have important implications for future practice of jurisdictions that are about to embark on the journey towards seamless, whole-of-government OSP implementation projects and the related organisational transformations in the back-end. Particularly, this study has confirmed the major challenges of e-government transformation to be

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- *An information management problem, rather than an IT problem*
- *Fostering horizontal (and vertical) collaboration in order to establish a common customer-oriented culture.*

For researchers and practitioners, this study provides an understanding of different service delivery models and their strengths and weaknesses. It provides insights into the leading departments in online service delivery. In this respect, the herein presented findings can be of help. Our study presented and discussed some general design options, i.e. delivery models that are all successfully applied in practice.

In our future work we will explore the details related to the development and maintenance of the information architecture, which centrally refers to the question of clustering and bundling public sector and potentially also private sector services based on citizen-oriented topic categories, demographics or life events. Current approaches are very limited, expensive and highly manual, capitalising on citizen focus groups performing bundling exercises of a very limited subset of the complete portfolio of services. We aim at learning from the bundling exercises to derive general patterns that could be leveraged in semi-automated approaches utilising service description metadata to support information architecture development and maintenance activities.

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