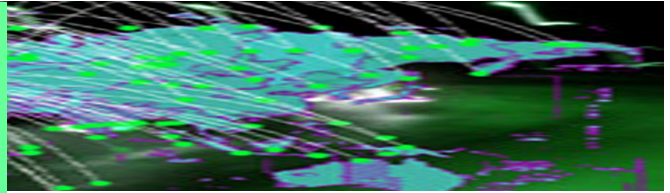


ELECTRONIC GOVERNMENT



Political and public service leaders know that enormous benefits can flow from electronic government (e-government). However, there can be a considerable gap between these potential benefits and what is actually achieved. The development of c-government (often described as “digital” government) is a much more complicated and costly endeavor than is commonly realized. There have been many remarkable successes in the application of [information and communication technologies \(ICTs\)](#) to government. There have also been many large and expensive failures, especially with large technology-based projects.

What is E-Government?

E-government can be broadly defined as the application of ICTs to the entire range of government activities. More specifically, it involves the use of ICTs, especially the Internet, to provide government services, promote citizen engagement, improve government management, and support government operations. The World Bank has noted that ICTs “can serve a variety of different ends: better delivery of government services to citizens, improved interactions with business and industry, citizen empowerment through access to information, or more efficient government management.” The suggested benefits include “less corruption, increased transparency, greater convenience, revenue growth, and/or cost reductions.”

[E-government](#) is often distinguished from [e-democracy](#), which focuses on the use of ICTs to strengthen the democratic system by such means as facilitating citizens’ participation in the political process and in government decision-making. E-government can also be distinguished from [e-governance](#), which is usually viewed as a broad concept comprising both c-government and e-democracy and including relationships between public officials and the wider society, notably private sector and non-governmental organizations.

The Evolution of E-Government

Discussion of the evolution of c-government is often set within a framework of stages of development. Most countries have completed the first stage — [building the initial infrastructure](#) for future development, including the creation of a website containing basic government information.

Many countries have made substantial progress on the second stage — [putting government services online](#) in the form of extensive information and the enabling of elementary transactions like obtaining passport applications (as in such countries as India and Canada).

A few governments have moved to the third stage of beginning to [transform their structures and processes](#) through automation, restructuring and re-engineering. Progress is made in integrating policy and operations in the “back office” to support service in the “front office” and in improving service to citizens through the Internet channel. There is also substantial integration of service delivery across departments and governments and between governments and the private sector.

In the fourth stage — moving toward next-generation government — the third-stage developments will be greatly extended, and integrated service delivery will be supplemented by [integration and rationalization of the main service delivery channels](#) of the Internet, the telephone and in-person service

Barriers to E-Government

There are several types of barriers to e-government. [Political barriers](#) include the resistance of some elected officials to innovative use of ICTs. [Structural barriers](#) can take such forms as the traditional emphasis on the vertical, hierarchical dimension of public organizations when successful electronic government requires heavy emphasis on the horizontal dimension.



There are also **managerial barriers**, like the lack of funding for the use of new ICTs, and operational barriers, like the lack of inter-operable computer systems between departments and governments. And there are **cultural barriers** arising, for example, from officials in one department who are unwilling to share data with those in other departments. Two pervasive barriers, namely **privacy and security** issues and the digital divide, deserve special attention.

Privacy and Security

E-government can involve the linking and sharing, as well as the collection and processing of large amounts of information on individual citizens. Many citizens are concerned that the **confidentiality** of their personal information contained in various government databanks may not be adequately protected. They are also concerned that the transmission of their personal communications with government, especially over the Internet, may not be secure from interception by third parties. As a result, there is substantial resistance to e-government initiatives that may enhance such values as efficiency and effectiveness but that may threaten privacy or security.

The Digital Divide

The term digital divide refers to the gap between ICT “haves” and “have-nots,” that is, between those who have access to ICTs and those who do not. The reasons for the gap include such demographic variables as income, education, age, gender, ethnicity and geographical location. For example, high-income people are more likely than low-income people to have computers and Internet access. Each country has to decide how much to invest in overcoming the digital divide.

E-Government in Developing Countries

International organizations are focused on overcoming the “global” digital divide — the ICT gap between developed and developing countries. The president of the World Bank has warned that “the digital divide is one of the greatest impediments to development, and it is growing exponentially.” The scope of the challenge varies greatly from one country to another. Countries like Brazil, Estonia and Malaysia have made significant progress in the acquisition and use of ICTs by both government and individual citizens. However, many of the poorest countries in the developing world simply do not have the resources to invest in ICTs. Available evidence suggests that the gap between information-rich countries and many information-poor ones is widening. For both developing and developed countries, there is considerable debate between “cyber-optimists” and “cyber-pessimists” about the likely long-term benefits of e-government.

Readings

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