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Transforming Government



Tearing Down Walls

Of course, creating an effective e-government system isn't as easy as it sounds. More than just a series of integrated systems, an effective e-government infrastructure means knowing the technological limitations of both your systems (including networks) and your users, prioritizing services, choosing the most appropriate delivery channels, understanding the government's systems, work processes, workflows, legislative and policy drivers, and being prepared to train users and administrators on how to use the system.



TO CREATE AN EFFECTIVE E-GOVERNMENT SYSTEM MEANS MITIGATING THE MANY CHALLENGES THAT CAN STAND IN THE WAY.

"Before you even get started, you have to ask a lot of questions," says Deepak Bhatia, Manager, ISG e-Government Practice, World Bank, Wash. "You have to question everything, from the government sponsorship and the institutional capacity available within government to inter-agency coordination, financing and technological literacy."



Failure to get answers to these key issues can cause the most ambitious e-government initiatives to meet with mixed success — or a flat fall.



In large part, that is what happened to the governments of Cambodia and China. The Royal Government of Cambodia, for example, initiated the Government Administrative Information System project several years ago, with support from the Prime Minister, in an effort to improve the administrative services available to citizens. While three of the four applications — the Real Estate Registration System, the Resident Registration System and the Vehicle Registration System — have achieved their goals, the fourth, the Electronic Approval System, did not achieve its goal of improving administrative processes. "The project's failure to meet all of its goals was due to many factors, including a low literacy rate among citizens, capacity gaps and capacity development," according to Leewood Phy, Secretary General, National ICT Development Authority, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.



A similar situation occurred in China, where the government's efforts to build a comprehensive e-government network have met with mixed success. Not only is the e-government system more government-centered than people-centered, but the online content is substandard; only about 60% provide laws and other policy documents, only 50% update their news daily and less than 54% provide keyword searches. "E-services have also suffered, with less than 27% providing downloadable or printable forms, less than 40% allowing users to submit complaints and less than 14% offering online applications," says Guo Liang, Director, Centre for Social Development, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.



Doing it Right

But when done right, the benefits are significant — for both citizens and governments. An effective e-government system improves citizen satisfaction by offering faster, efficient processing of a greater variety of applications, registrations, payments and grievances.

To create an effective e-government system means mitigating the many challenges that can stand in the way.

"Technical literacy is a major challenge, especially in rural areas or developing countries. In India, for example, more than 90% of citizens can't even dream of owning a computer, and few are digitally literate," contends Chakrabarty. Systems in India have dealt with that problem by implementing a network of easy-to-use kiosks across the country. Many are located in small shops throughout cities, where they can be operated by franchisees upon request from citizens, solving the issue.

"It's also important to understand what technology citizens are most comfortable with, and to incorporate that into the plan," says John Kost, Managing VP, Government and Health Care Research Worldwide, Gartner, Stamford, Conn. Malta, for example, is building its citizen-service strategy largely around SMS and mobile-phone technology, while South Africa, recognizing that not only is Web access limited but phone lines are also still quite rate, is building a strategy around technology-enabled multipurpose community centers, which are bringing government access to more citizens. And India, of course, is using the kiosk approach.

Resistance to change can also be a major hurdle. "The fact that people have been doing something in a certain form for the past 35 years and have now been asked to do things differently is a real issue," says Chakrabarty. To mitigate these challenges, TCS treats the issue seriously, taking government workers through training before implementation and doing plenty of hand-holding post-deployment.

Legal and policy issues must also be taken into consideration. If, for example, the system will include digital signatures, decision-makers must make sure that privacy laws don't hinder the project.

"In some ways, in fact, developing an e-government infrastructure is easier in developing countries than more developed countries, because developing countries tend to have less data protection and weaker privacy laws, as well as less



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