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Transforming Government



When done right, e-governance can help transform countries - and the way citizens view government. Service providers are seizing the opportunity to make a difference

Karen Schwartz



AS THE INTERNET HAS become ubiquitous and pervasive, citizens in every country around the world — even those in developing countries — have come to demand faster, more efficient access to services. After all, if they can perform a transaction on eBay at midnight, why shouldn't they be able to access information from their own government on demand?



Governments have responded by developing e-government initiatives that include everything from basic e-enablement of documents to more ambitious and effective integrated e-enabled government service systems designed to allow citizens to do everything from applying for a business permit to recording a death certificate electronically.



In a way, e-government is becoming the great equalizer, melting the economic and physical boundaries that have often separated poor or rural citizens from accessing the same services as their wealthier, more urban counterparts.



Governments around the world are realizing the potential of e-government, and most are in some stage of implementation or development. The U.K., for example, has outlined a vision to transform its government, requiring that IT-enabled services be designed around citizens and businesses instead of providers and that government move to a shared-services culture. The plan aims to do this by exploiting the full potential of electronic service delivery and standardizing the planning, delivery, management, skills and governance of these changes. Similarly, India has a host of e-government initiatives under the umbrella of its National eGovernance Plan, an overarching plan that promises to revolutionize how the country serves its citizens. "The plan will provide e-enabled services to citizens and businesses by 2009, largely through the installation of hundreds of thousands of citizen service centers throughout India," explains Vikas Kanungo, Chairman, Society for the Promotion of eGovernance, based in New Delhi.



One example is Andhra Pradesh, the fifth-largest state in India. State government officials joined with global consultancy Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) in a joint venture, 89% owned by TCS and 11% by the government, to set up a citizen service-delivery portal offering more than 200 government services to citizens via 2,200 franchisee-operated kiosks around the state. More than 300,000 registered users currently visit these multilingual kiosks, which are open 10–12 hours per day, at their convenience, to apply for birth, marriage and death certificates and a variety of licenses, permits and certificates. Users can also submit online payments for utilities, taxes, fees, deposits and stamp duties.



"The e-government portal approach has worked so well in Andhra Pradesh that TCS is expanding its capabilities to offer specialized advisory services, such as a database of answers to questions farmers might have about what fertilizer makes sense for their land or what cropping patterns they should use based on the land in the region," explains Tanmoy Chakrabarty, VP, Global Government Industry Group, TCS.



Clearly, the e-government effort in the state, just one of dozens of projects related to the country's National e-Governance Plan, is a re-sounding success. Projects like these, when done right, can truly transform services that were once unavailable to masses of citizens, while allowing governments to reach their full potential of accessibility and effectiveness.

"E-government has the potential to fundamentally change the way government works, as long as you don't take the view that it's all about putting things on the Web," says Dan Gilbert, Consultant, Global Industry, Global Government Group, EDS, Plano, Tex. "Political issues aside, e-government can fundamentally transform government and give you the maximum bang for your buck if you focus on tuning your service environment to what your citizens actually need, and create a flexible service environment that can adapt and change as segment behavior and needs change."

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