E-Government Strategies: Best Practice Reports From the European Front Line

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Abstract. This paper reports on some of the recently completed work of the EU-supported Prisma project examining the best of e-government experience across Europe in relation to technology, organisational change and meeting the needs of the user (citizens and business). Future work of Prisma involves developing scenarios of change over the next ten years, building future-oriented best practice models and providing comprehensible and useful tools for practitioners and researchers to guide their decision making and research priorities respectively. Apart from examining e-government and e-governance generally, Prisma is also examining six service areas in detail: administrations, health, persons with special needs (the disabled and elderly), environment, transport and tourism.

1 Context and drivers of change in government and governance

The importance of government is clear. Not only are we all dependent upon its services and the framework of law, peace and stability it provides, but in Europe it also contributes 40% of GDP. Over the past few years, however, the concepts of government and governance have been dramatically transformed. Not only is this due to increasing pressures and expectations that the way we are governed should reflect modern methods of efficiency and effectiveness (like the best of business) but also that governments should be more open to democratic accountability. This cauldron of change is now finding itself once again brought to the boil by the impact of new digital technologies on government. In many ways e-government enables the dual goals of efficiency and democracy to be met more cheaply and easily than previously envisaged, but the new technologies go much further than this. They are starting to redefine the landscape of government by changing the relationships (power and responsibility) between players – between service providers and industry, between the public and private sectors, and between government and citizen – by forging new organisational and economic structures, by introducing new processes at work and in the community, and above all by opening new opportunities as well as posing new challenges, not least the threat of new digital divides.

Despite the power of the new technologies in providing global reach and interactivity, models of e-government are cultural and political rather than technical.

This can be seen in Europe by comparing the very diverse levels of take up and of policy approaches, ranging from the Scandinavian and Anglo-Irish models of northern Europe, through the more statist, public sector driven responses of central Europe, to southern Europe's strong tradition for family, community and city-region driven approaches.

Across Europe, however, similar forces are acting out despite the variety of policy responses on the ground. The citizen is being treated more and more like a customer, the ICT literate are demanding the option of self-service through the increasing availability of on-line services, the roles of supplier and user of government services are blurring, as indeed are the distinctions between public and private sectors, for example as seen in the increasingly important role of the third sector and intermediaries and the establishment of many PPPs (public-private partnerships) to administer and deliver what have traditionally been seen as purely public services. Networks rather than hierarchies of interests, alliances and actors are increasingly determining how government, and especially e-government, is mapping out.

2 Lessons and experiences from Europe

E-government is not just about a government portal with services offered electronically. It is also very much about the need to use ICT to support better quality "warm" human services, so that government 'on-line' complements rather than substitutes for government 'in-person'. These goals are simultaneously driven by and the result of:

i) both intra-and inter- governmental reengineering
ii) the needs to strengthen efficiency, the public service ethic and democratic and open government.

E-government shares basic notions of business and work requirements with e-business, while at the same time it has its own distinctive features and problems manifest at European, national, regional, and local government levels. Thus, government, like business, requires greater efficiency, productivity, cost reductions, and treating citizens like customers. In this sense it shares the need for business process re-engineering. On the other hand, government, unlike business cannot choose its customers and, indeed, people are more than just customers, they relate to government as legal entities, e.g. as taxpayers, information users, hospital service customers and, generally, citizens who want to be aware, considered, recognised as participants in the democratic process, and free to express their opinions (e.g. through e-voting). Government also has stringent requirements such as:

- exemplary public service ethic with a focus on issues such as the welfare and health of the citizen and the equal treatment of all
- access for all
- caring for a sustainable environment, affordable public transport, etc.
- supply and demand for e-services, without a profit incentive, but subject to accountability and benchmarking
- provision of an institutional and a service framework for the wider economy.

In this sense, it is appropriate to talk of “government process re-engineering” (GPR), including not only services and relations with customers but also transparent, open and accountable government processes and relations with citizens in the digital democracy. This deep modernisation of government implies the development of a new culture for governance in public services, including new mindsets and sets of values, and new behaviours, as well as a re-engineering of structures.

2.1 Inter-Governmental Process Re-engineering

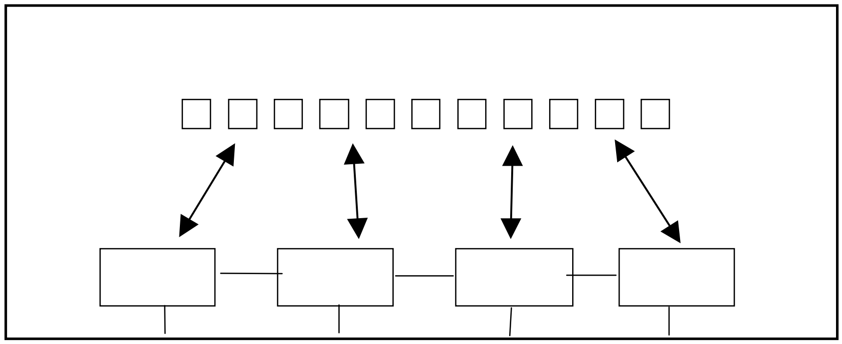
A simple model of how the internal structures of government, typically when adopting e-government solutions, are being re-engineered in Europe, is provided in the accompanying four diagrams.

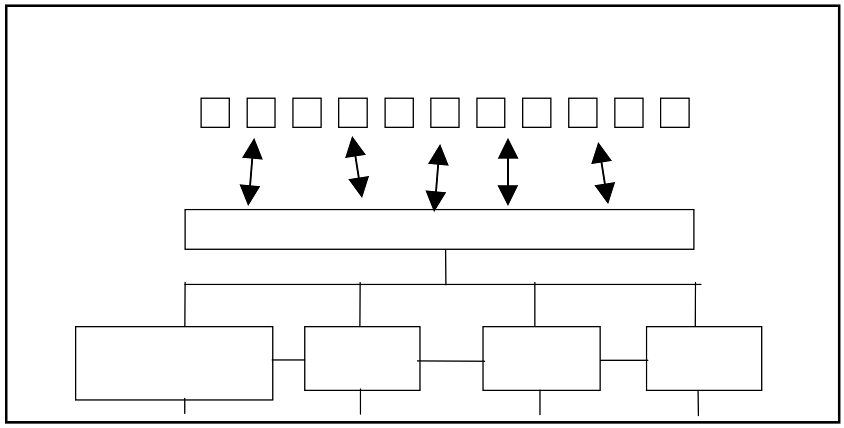
Diagram 1 shows the traditional structure of government before re-engineering. The first structural re-engineering tends to take place by the creation of a front-office (in diagram 2). This creates a one-stop shop enabling citizens and business to access government services through one point, regardless of their purpose, rather than through a multitude of points depending upon the organisational structure of government. Diagram 2 represents the state of art in many local and regional government agencies in Europe today.

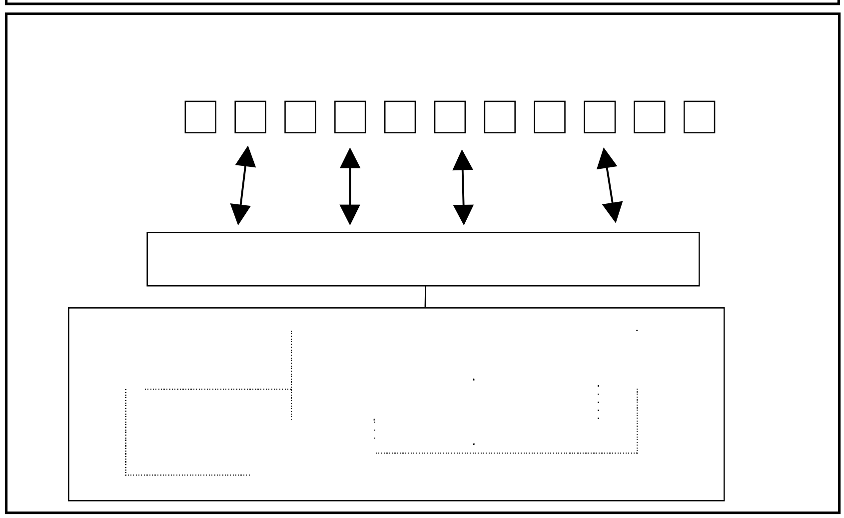
In diagram 3, as the front-office logic (customer interface and service) takes hold and starts to determine the development of internal structures and processes, it is necessary for the back office to re-organise in order to reflect the needs of the front office and the customer. Traditional back-office departments, relationships and processes thus give way to ones determined by customer service through a front office.

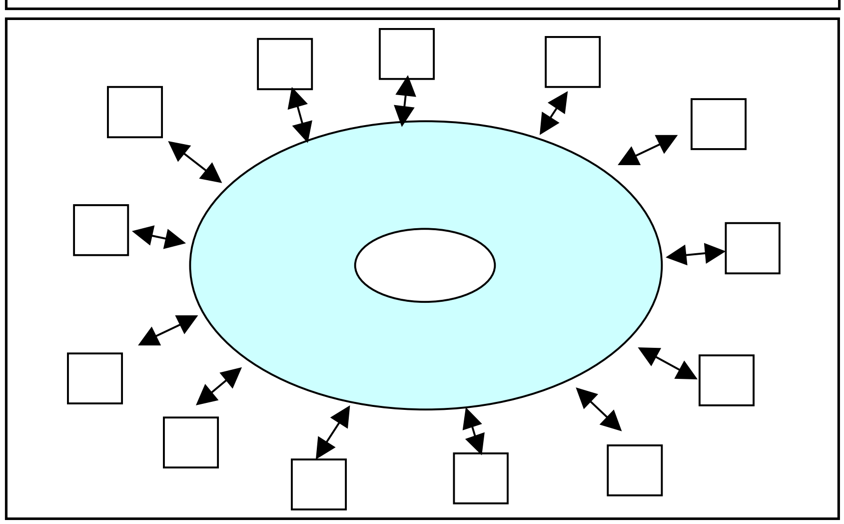
Finally., in diagram 4, as demonstrated by a few European leaders, there is a decisive shift from “cold” administration (i.e. the back office) to “warm” ICT-supported human services (i.e. front office) in terms of personnel, and increasingly also in terms of resources. Small, ICT-automated back offices can serve and support very large front offices with more frontline ICT-supported human services based upon the improved cost-effectiveness and increased quality of administrative back office procedures.

In other words, the best of new e-governance in Europe is certainly not just about a government portal with services offered electronically. Rather, it is about this, plus internal reengineering of government, greater transparency, citizen access and involvement, and, above all, ICT support for better quality “warm” human services. For example, better direct health care of patients wherever they are, care of the elderly and disabled in their homes by government staff using interactive digital terminals to increase the timeliness and quality of information and support systems, improved responsiveness and efficiency of one-stop shop staff when dealing with direct enquiries, more efficient planning and control systems for delivering frontline services, etc. E-government could, and maybe should, lead to more, not less, human-orientated services.









2.2 Inter-Governmental Process Re-engineering

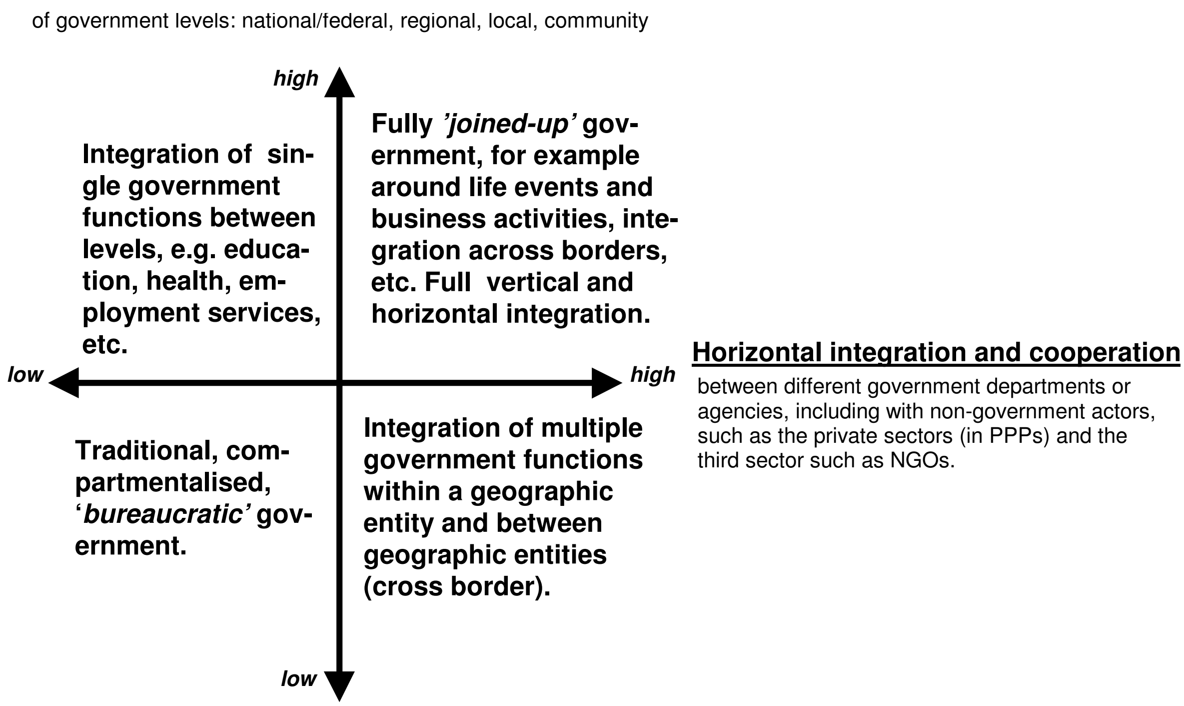
Government in Europe is not only confronting massive internal changes but is also grappling with the need to re-examine the whole structure of government. Apart from the macro issues of EU enlargement and the need to specify more clearly the respective roles of European, national and regional/local institutions, is the need to look again at how government at the meso, as well as the micro, level is organised. E-government cannot reap the potentially large benefits it promises without sharing information and responsibility amongst its various parts – and this demands also a reconsideration of respective tasks. and powers. Already the best European examples of e-government require only one minimal data input or request by citizens or business who do not wish to know where, in the often vast apparatus of government, his or her case is being processed. The citizen only wants an effective, rapid and high quality service and is generally not interested in who provides it or how. The citizens' information is often already held somewhere, and as long as data protection, security and anonymity issues are safeguarded where warranted, Europeans generally trust government sufficiently on this point.

In order to achieve these objectives, electronic transactions thus imply that government agencies need to co-operate and even, where necessary, integrate and re-engineer their structures and processes. They certainly need to be '*joined-up*'. Such re-engineering should be considered both horizontally and vertically, as shown in the following diagram. The terms '*integration*' and '*joined-up*', as used here, should not be confused with '*centralised*'. Indeed, government can be both highly integrated, joined-up and de-centralised. In fact, a third '*centralised-decentralised*' dimension could usefully be added to the diagram.

It is, of course, often the case that both vertical and horizontal integration, driven by ICT as well as other political and financial imperatives, are often part of the same policy, which is itself normally driven by a central government, top-down agenda (whether or not part of a centralising or de-centralising initiative).

2.3 Services Delivery

E-government enables many services to be delivered around the clock, throughout the year and ubiquitously across space. As shown above, it can put substantial power in the hands of the ICT-literate citizen so that the whole purpose, structure and mode of operation of government becomes re-engineered to the needs of those it serves. Many European government agencies and administrations are re-organising service access to take account of ICT, so that, in addition to face-to-face, new service channels are available which can either completely replace traditional channels or, as is more usual and desirable, supplement them, for example, phone and fax, Internet, kiosks, WAP, mobile, digital TV, etc. Not only are the number and types of channels proliferating, so too is the organisation of the service delivery itself. Especially in the case of Internet portals, the best of e-government in Europe now organises services:



- for citizens, around life events, life episodes or the life cycle, such as birth, marriage, death, unemployment, education, living, home, working, sport and leisure, etc., etc.
- for business, around discrete business activities, such as VAT, tax, finance, employment, etc., typically supported by the business case approach where examples of typical situations are given and the service needs of businesses exemplified.

In this way, government re-organises to reflect citizen and business concerns rather than its own internal concerns and structure, and provides multiple interface channels.

2.4 Access For All

In many ways, the new technology, as mentioned above, does provide greater opportunities for access, for example by people in remote locations, those who work unsocial hours, or those who are immobile and thus cannot attend offices in person.

However, there are important problems in determining precisely what citizens want and need, and how to provide e-government services in a user-friendly and effective way. User needs are always conditioned by what they already get, or imagine they can get. The best examples in Europe break down users into different categories, not just citizen and business, but also, for example, the elderly, the disabled, the visitor, the voter, professional users, etc., rather than treat users en bloc. The presentation of e-services through life events or business activities often supports such segmentation, although there can sometimes be problems of critical mass, i.e. a sufficient mass of a user segment to make the approach financially viable especially where special technologies like smart cards are needed for access and/or transactions like payment by or to the user.

The principle of access for all is also an important policy objective of the EU as well as of national and regional government authorities. This particularly means tackling the digital divide between citizens who do have access to ICT and are ICT-literate, on the one hand, and those who do not have access or the necessary skills, on the other. This is the biggest challenge facing the European Information Society in general, and e-government implementation in particular. Good examples to tackle digital exclusion include special training, the provision of PIAPs (public internet access points) and an acceptance that e-government does not only mean government-on-line but also a continuation of the public service ethic through government-in-person, though supported in terms of effectiveness and quality by ICT, both at the delivery point as used by government staff and in the back office.

3.5 Legal Issues, Security and Trust

Given both that governments are expected to be trustworthy and responsible guardians of the rights of citizens, and that they tend to hold vast amounts of data covering all aspects of the lives of citizens and businesses, systems and data security and trust in using them is vital. As a result, many European countries now have strong data protection laws, but these need constantly updating as new technologies come on stream and as new political and financial requirements manifest themselves. For example, much stress is now being placed upon trust, security and confidence, also in relation to fighting crime and terrorism against electronic, physical and personal property.

Security of transactions, for example using smart cards, is one of the biggest issues, although the barriers to widespread easy to use systems are often as much political and commercial than technical. Above all, there is a need for trust in interoperable systems, including data protection and privacy, as well as the need for anonymity where this is required, but balancing this with the legitimate needs of the authorities is not always easy. For the individual citizen or business, conducting electronic transactions requires cheap, easy to use and secure solutions in which information is easily authenticated and is reliable. The biggest challenge to interoperability across Europe is that legal systems between countries are highly incompatible. However, many trials and examples of roll-out have been successful, so there is confidence that solutions to these challenges are in sight.

3.6 Technology

Technical issues have been raised elsewhere in this paper, but all these need to be seen in the context of the speed and complexity of technological advance. This often makes it difficult for governments to keep pace and adapt their organisational structures, the skills of their staff and the actual e-services offered, in a timely, effective and financially responsible manner. European best practice in relation to technology shows that there is a need to adopt open standards, multiple access platforms, scalability, striking a balance between customised large scale turnkey solutions versus outsourcing and standardised solutions, and new technology models for eGovernment (e.g. mobile solutions, ambient intelligence, etc.)

3.7 Finance

Finance is, understandably, often the crunch factor. Like government the world over, European authorities tend to see their budgets squeezed in all directions, yet, at the same time, they are expected to deliver "more for less".

Experience shows that there is a trade-off between electronic and traditional services, in which e-services typically require heavy capital investments but can save substantial amounts in the longer term, both through improved efficiency and rationalisation, as well as because of greater service outreach and quality. Finance is needed not just for the technology but also for organisational change, as well as skills and competence development costs. Ultimately, government budgets are a political matter, especially as demand for government services tends to be infinite, particularly when offered free at the point of delivery. Good examples in Europe have shown how increased sources of investment and revenue can be generated, for example through greater efficiency of tax collection and the elimination of waste using ICT, well constructed agreements with private investors, the introduction of e-procurement particularly on a national or regional basis, etc. Getting the finance right, but not being driven only by a focus on costs whilst ignoring benefits, is a necessary condition for e-government.

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