

Unleashing the potential of e-Government: The challenge for public sector managers

Think of an Internet success story and think of an organisation that has provided an attractive on-line alternative to exchanging information, goods or services through traditional methods such as the telephone or physical contact.

Ryanair's on-line booking facility is probably one of the better known examples of how a more efficient service can be provided - while at the same time leading to cost savings for both service provider and user.

Now think of other organisation types that fit that bill – retail, media, banking, insurance, travel – bet you didn't think central government, healthcare, local authorities...

And why not? Probably, because despite the extensive promotion of e-Government and the benefits it can bring to citizens and businesses interacting with government bodies, the number of truly on-line public services in Ireland is fewer than might be expected.

Most e-Government implementers, commentators and observers are aware of what needs to happen at a national level to move forward. The creation of a supportive legislative environment, the development of technological infrastructure and common standards, and the provision of access, are some of the essential requirements.

However, there is arguably less debate about what needs to happen at an organisational level. Prospectus has conducted research into the requirements of individual organisations implementing e-Government.

The following commentary outlines some of the results of this research, and aims to provoke some thoughts about:

- Why e-Government in Ireland has not fulfilled its true potential to date
- How individual public sector organisations can move e-Government forward?

e-Government in Ireland: Fulfilling its true potential

The Irish Government published an Action Plan in 1999 to implement an Information Society in Ireland, which outlined a number of targets to ensure that Ireland became an early mover and global player in the on-line world. Some of these targets are listed in figure 1 below.

Figure 1: 1999 Government Action Plan targets

- All government information services on-line by April 2001
- Online interactivity for all government services by end-2001
- All government services to be integrated through the public service broker by end 2002
- Ensure that the Reach Agency is the focal point for the development of the Connected Government agenda in relation to service delivery
- Provide a web-site giving information on public procurement by January 2001 and provide an integrated service in early 2002
- Create a framework for on-line payment to and from government by April 2001

Significant progress has been made in several areas, including:

- The on-going development of a national framework for e-Government through the Reach initiative
- Key portals for citizens and businesses through the OASIS and BASIS projects (www.oasis.ie and www.basis.ie)
- A number of transactional initiatives such as facilitating on-line tax returns through the

Revenue On-Line System and the on-line FAS service for jobseekers and employers

However, most public sector organisations have not progressed beyond providing on-line information and facilitating on-line communication through e-mail. This suggests that national targets may need to be revised to challenge individual organisations to tap into the full potential of e-Government.

A recent international benchmarking report indicates a growing gap between Ireland and the key global players in e-Government.

The report, published by the Office of the e-Envoy in the UK¹ provides details of the significant progress of several international e-Government initiatives. Examples of these are listed in figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Ground-breaking e-Government

Australian Childhood Immunisation Register

Registered private sector immunisation providers and approved Internet clients can request information through a reporting system, record immunisation services, view a child's recorded immunisation history and monitor claims lodged under their provider number

www1.hic.gov.au/general/acircirghome

Hong Kong Electronic Service Delivery Scheme

Offers a wide range of public and related services, supported by a number of commercial partners.

www.esd.gov.hk

Canadian Government Service Portal

Provides access to differentiated on-line services for Canadian citizens and business, and non-Canadians – e.g. a Business Start-up Assistant for new companies, including relevant information and on-line registration etc.

www.canada.gc.ca

US Government portal - FirstGov

First point of call for American government services – includes a facility for on-line purchase of a wide range of public sector commodities – from savings bonds to government publications; and a comprehensive database of government forms and applications.

www.firstgov.com

The report also outlines some of the fundamental lessons learnt while implementing these initiatives, some of which are outlined in figure 3.

Figure 3: Lessons learnt:

1. Focus on the needs of the user
2. Develop a clear and shared vision, strategy and supporting action plan for your organisation – with a concrete programme of initiatives
3. Ensure support from senior management
4. Use IT to improve existing ways of working, not just to automate them
5. Provide dedicated resources (people and budgets) for any initiatives
6. Set demanding deadlines for delivery
7. Create awareness and interest of new on-line services – market these to users, partners and stakeholders

So why aren't we further down the road of e-Government in Ireland?

Implementing true e-Government impacts on both front and back-office processes. Most Irish organisations with an on-line presence today have developed front-office processes to support users accessing information and making contact through the organisation's web-site. Examples of these are e-mail enquiry forms and downloadable application forms and leaflets.

However, aligning back office processes to start transacting with users is more of a challenge. Fewer organisations have

¹ "e-Government: Benchmarking Electronic Service Delivery" - www.e-envoy.gov.uk/publications/int_comparisons

made this additional step - despite the efficiency gains. In the case of the Revenue Commissioner's Revenue On-line System (ROS), users can not only download tax return information, but also can file their returns and make any associated payments through ROS's web-site.

The fact that most Irish e-Government initiatives to date have concentrated on ensuring front-office capability only, diverts necessary attention away from looking at existing back-office processes and infrastructure and assessing what needs to happen to enable on-line transactional and collaborative services.

Why are back office processes on the back burner?

- Adoption of new technology requires substantial skills and resources, which aren't always readily available
- Lack of demand - Ireland differs from more ambitious implementers as it has a lower proportion of the population with access to the Internet – 28% compared to rates of 49% and 56% in Hong Kong and the United States respectively². This leads to a lower demand from citizens for on-line service options, but equally challenges the public sector to create demand by providing and promoting attractive services.

Each of these factors has resulted in a slower pace of implementation than might have been expected. But as other countries continue to demonstrate the potential of e-Government to both simplify and improve public services, the argument grows for public sector organisations in Ireland to follow suit.

So what needs to happen in individual public sector organisations to move e-Government forward?

The Information Society Commission lists a number of additional critical requirements at a national level for developing e-Government in figure 4:

Figure 4: Requirements for e-Government

- Responsibility for development to be owned at the highest level
- Effective partnership among the public, private and community and voluntary sectors
- A strong co-ordination focus across departments and agencies with all elements working together within a clear vision and published action plans
- A high concentration on implementation and enforcement
- The need for greater speed in the translation of policy development into implementation.

The ambitious plans for a public services broker through the Reach Agency is likely to address most of these requirements. As it develops, this broker model will provide transactional services in a customer-centric manner across the entire public sector.

However, for this to happen, individual organisations need to ensure their back-office processes are capable of supporting on-line service delivery.

Prospectus has 3 key recommendations for public sector managers wishing to tap the true potential of e-Government:

1. Think strategically, and think long-term
2. Prepare the organisation
3. Implement at an ambitious but realistic pace

1. Think strategically, and think long term

- **Focus on how the internet can add value – internally and externally**
Improving customer service should not be the only consideration. The Internet offers many opportunities

² Source: Nua Internet Surveys, Nov. 2000

to support internal activities, e.g. training and development, information transfer and internal transactions. Many public sector organisations are now using intranets and extranets to carry out internal administration and communication, and interaction with other agencies.

- **Think long term / anticipate future needs**

Technological developments are certain to continue at their current pace, leading to more and more applications of the Internet being used on a daily basis. The public sector broker is just one example of how public services will be delivered in the future. As a result, citizens and businesses alike will expect to access the majority of public services over the Internet.

Organisations should therefore be deciding on a long-term strategy for e-Government, and developing necessary internal and external capabilities and strategic alliances. Providing more information on-line is unlikely to keep pace with expectations.

- **Develop strategic partnerships**

Strategic partnerships with other public (and private) sector organisations should be investigated, and joint initiatives promoted where possible. Skills transfer, quicker implementation times and external investment are all potential benefits of these alliances.

2. Prepare the organisation

- **Assess what gaps exist in terms of capability or capacity**

The identification of gaps should not only consider technological capabilities, but also issues such as staff ability and awareness. Specific actions should be agreed for each of these gaps, and targets

and responsibilities set, for example the provision of Internet access to service users.

- **Concentrate on the back office, not just the shop front window**

Harnessing Internet technologies shouldn't be just about interacting with the end user on-line.

Improving and streamlining existing processes is a core support to maximizing the use of on-line technologies. For example, a website can be used for facilitating on-line payments.

- **Increase awareness of new technologies and their applications**

Internet technologies and their applications are advancing at a hectic pace. In order for public sector organisations to harness the potential it is imperative that there is continual research into and observation of trends nationally and globally.

At an organisational and sectoral level, it is essential that policy and best practice working groups are set up and maintained. It is also vital that on-line initiatives are promoted among internal and external users.

Incentives to use on-line systems should also be considered – for example quicker guaranteed response times to on-line queries, or discounts for on-line payments.

- **Involve all staff**

The staff of an organisation are its most valuable resource, and as such should be encouraged to support and develop the strategic objectives of the organisation.

Whether directly or indirectly involved in the development and implementation of the organisation's e-Government strategy, all staff should be consulted and kept informed at regular intervals.

- **Manage change**

As with any significant catalyst for change, it is important that the implementation of e-Government strategies is managed appropriately. Stakeholder consultation and communication is vital to the success of any planned initiatives.

3. Implement at an ambitious but realistic pace

- **Break down your overall strategy into phases**

The importance of planning is essential. In order to maintain momentum and commitment, it is vital that any long-term strategy is broken down into discrete, manageable phases with concrete end results. The successful delivery within deadlines for initial phases provides renewed momentum and organisational commitment to future phases.

Conclusion

It has been said that true e-Government requires the transformation of all the systems involved in processing a transaction, not just those facing citizens. As one cynic put it, "If a citizen fills in and submits an electronic form on an organisation's website, only for it to be printed out in a office where an employee must type the information into a database, all you've done is built a great big remote controlled typewriter."

The challenge for public sector organisations is to tap the full potential of the Internet for their individual organisations – today.

If you would like to contact Prospectus about this article, or to discuss how we can help you achieve the full potential of e-Government for your organisation, please contact Jill Mathews on 01 2180310, or at jmathews@prospectus.ie.

Useful web-site addresses

e-Government in Ireland

www.bettergov.ie - Latest government policy on the strategic management initiative, including e-Government

www.basis.ie - The provision of related services for Irish businesses

www.oasis.ie - The provision of related services for citizens in general

www.isc.ie - Benchmarking of e-Government initiatives in Ireland

www.reach.ie - Information on the proposed public services broker for Ireland

www.ros.ie - The Revenue Commissioners' on-line tax filing system

International e-Government

www.open.gov.uk - The information portal of the UK government

www.ukonline.gov.uk - The integrated service portal of the UK government

www.gagta.com - The State of Georgia recently established the Georgia Technology Authority. The GTA is an advisory board mandated to bring "a coordinated and comprehensive IT vision to state government by providing agencies with technical assistance in strategic planning, program management, and human resources development." Each member of the Board must come from the private sector, and must have experience in managing large IT enterprises

www.vaestorekisterikeskus.fi - Details of first smart electronic citizen card in the world

www.finances.gouv.fr - website providing facility for tax calculation

www.pay.gov - US government portal site allowing everything from paying bills and applying for passports to paying off student loans and obtaining fishing permits