

Exploiting Public Sector Information through Innovative E-Government Policies

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INTRODUCTION

The digital, knowledge-based economy (European Commission, 2003a) has a strong impact on the life of all citizens at the global level. Under suitable terms and/or appropriate conditions, it can be a powerful “engine” for growth, competitiveness, and jobs, while at the same time it improves living standards.

The multiplicity of innovative Information Society (Dutta, Paua, & Lanvin, 2004) tools has led to unprecedented possibilities to combine data taken from different and various sources into added-value products and services. To this perspective, public sector information can be an important “prime” material for relevant applications.

For the specific framework of the European Union (EU), the public sector information (European Commission, 1998) plays a very important role in its social and economic models by supporting high levels of welfare for citizens, ensuring socioeconomic cohesion, and sustaining the functioning of a competitive and fully liberalized market environment. In particular, the public sector engages in a wide range of activities, varying from education, healthcare, and social security, to protecting consumers and strengthening the environment. Consequently, financial and business information is collected by a number of ministries and other appropriate organizations.

Company registers, usually required by law in many Member States, are also maintained by the public sector. Legal information (in particular concerning legislation and jurisprudence) and administrative information constitute another example, while patent offices are usually public sector bodies. Scientific, technical, cultural, and medical information is extensively collected by public research institutions and public archives. Geographical information relevant to transport and tourism (e.g., maps, road traffic situation) is also available in corresponding public agencies. Furthermore, tourist information is gathered and published by public sector bodies at different levels of government.

Learning how to manage and to exploit all relevant information produced and stored could create a very high

level of public value (and this is probably an unavoidable step towards a future user-centered government). Even greater potential benefits can result if governments, authorities, and/or organizations actively participate in the development of the knowledge-based society, in the true sense to create public-shared spaces for the creation and the delivery of various forms of “knowledge.”

However, today there are still some “barriers” preventing the full “exploitation” of public sector information at the European level. These may originate from diversities either in language or in pricing issues, or in (administrative) rules and/or practices, such as differences in replying time, the refusal to transmit the information in digital format, the need to prove that the information is not limited by data-protection rules, and exclusive deals that already exist between public and private firms.

In fact, Europe’s public sector (Cap Gemini Ernst & Young, 2004) is today at a crossroads, in front of numerous global challenging conditions, institutional change, and the profound impact of new technologies in a background which evolves very rapidly. Expectation is growing that, as it is a major economic performer for boosting growth and innovation, the public sector can (and will) play a strong role in realizing the Lisbon strategy (European Commission, 2000; European Council, 2003) for economic, social, and environmental renewal. It should be expected that the public sector would become more productive, cut the “red tape,” eliminate queues, and offer services of improved quality.

Simultaneously, the European public sector will, over the next decade, undergo a number of transitions (such as increasing cultural and religious diversity, aging of the population, and changing living, working, and consumption patterns) that will require new services as well as innovative ways of delivering the existing ones. In particular, the public sector should “close” the demographic deficit, restore democratic ownership, and cope with demographic change (e.g., aging, immigration, etc.). Other perspectives may be relevant to safeguard liberty, justice, and security. The public administrations are now facing (with a medium- to long-term time horizon) very power-

fully the challenge (DG Information Society of the European Commission, 2001) of improving the efficiency, productivity, and quality of their offerings, to respond to all the forthcoming needs and demands. This may result in new ways of delivering services to citizens and businesses while coping with various domains, especially if considering initiatives to extend the internal market and to deepen convergence in enlargement (OECD, 2003; IDA eGovernment Observatory, 2002; Chochliouros & Spiliopoulou-Chochliourou, 2003a). This option also implicates special perspectives such as identity management, advanced public electronic services, deployment of dynamic and personalized services, and exploitation of innovation in technology.

BACKGROUND

The initial concept of electronic government (e-government) took off a few years ago, mostly as the “*mirror image*” of electronic commerce (e-commerce) in the public sector. However, the e-government has now become an explicit component of public sector reform as a fundamental instrument to increase efficiency, strengthen competitiveness, and enhance modernization.

In particular, e-government can be now estimated (European Commission, 2003c) as: “...the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in public administrations combined with organizational change and new skills in order to improve public services and democratic processes and strengthen support to public policies.”

Experiences and up-to-date practices have very clearly demonstrated that relevant activities can refer to a great diversity of functions (European Institute of Public Administration, 2003), including, *inter-alia*:

- Electronic public services (e-services) to end-users, either citizens or corporate businesses; these could include applications, facilities, and/or additional electronic features related to government *online* presence/access and the provision of *online* services, customs’ services, value-added taxes, *online* job search, *online* requests for personal documents, *online* book search in public libraries, and so forth.
- Electronic procurement (e-procurement)—that is, the means for the realization of *online purchases*. The adoption of electronic public procurement systems is driven by the need to reduce costs and favor purchases in large volumes, thus limiting the number of contracts. Although such an option can be occasionally included in e-services (as a specific

modular component), it may follow completely different implementation dynamics. In fact, it is currently promoted by higher-level administrations and typically requires considerable internal government reorganization. Early experiences seem to suggest extra benefits in terms of cost savings and improvement of transparency, however there are still strong “resistances” by local stakeholders, threatened by the concentration of purchase activities and other constituencies.

- Electronic democracy (e-democracy), in a way to support the genuine participation of citizens in politics. Although still in its “infancy” and at elementary levels (with some pioneer experiences especially in northern Europe), e-democracy formulates a very promising expectation for the future.

E-GOVERNMENT AS THE “VEHICLE” FOR EXPLOITING “PUBLIC VALUE”

In fact, e-government implicates the use of emerging technologies to transform public administrations and to improve radically the way they work with their customers, be they citizens, enterprises, or other administrations. The e-government is now a key vehicle for the implementation and achievement of “higher policy” objectives. It is unlikely that relevant objectives on the single market freedoms, industrial policy, liberalization and competition, sustainable development, and security across the EU can be achieved (Chochliouros & Spiliopoulou-Chochliourou, 2003a) unless such interoperable services are swiftly implemented.

This places e-government at the “core” of public management renovation and reform, where technology is used as a strategic tool to modernize structures, processes, the regulatory framework (Chochliouros & Spiliopoulou-Chochliourou, 2003b), human resources, and the culture of public administrations to provide better government and, ultimately, increased “public value.”

The creation of public value is a broad term that includes a multiplicity of democratic, social, economic, environmental, and governance roles. Some quite indicative but concrete examples may refer to: (a) the provision of public administration and public services (such as health, education, and social care); (b) the development and the implementation of policies, accompanied by an appropriate regulatory framework to reflect real market needs; (c) the supervision and the management of public finances; (d) the guarantee of democratic political processes, gender equality, social inclusion, and personal security; and (e) the management of environmental sustainability and development.

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