Motives, Strategic Approach, Objectives & Focal Areas in e-Gov-Induced Change

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ABSTRACT

In its early catalogue and transaction phases, E-Government (e-Gov) has been quite successful, although some critics say that it mainly reaped the harvest of relatively low hanging fruits by making paper-based information accessible over the Web, and also by Web-enabling some existing transaction processes. The subsequent horizontal and vertical integration phases of e-Gov, those critics hold, present a greater challenge and require more technological sophistication and organizational effort. Business processes may need streamlining, change, and even replacement in order to become more citizen-centric and also increase government internal effectiveness and efficiency (IEE). This exploratory study finds that strategies and objectives for reaching the integration phase vary with focal areas and motives. However, e-Gov, it is found, is a main driver of business process change in the public sector. Many practices and lessons learned from private sector reengineering apply in the government context.

Keywords: business process change; g2b; g2c; g2g; horizontal integration; internal effectiveness and efficiency (IEE); interoperability; project success and failure; reengineering; stakeholder management; vertical integration

INTRODUCTION

Practitioners and scholars alike agree that with the advent of Internet-related technologies, which technically underpin the broader movement of organizational streamlining and reorientation in the public sector now known as e-Gov (Scholl, 2003a), the business of government has begun to undergo a deep transformation (Balutis, 2001a, 2001b; Fountain, 2001; Layne & Lee, 2001; Traunmueller & Wimmer, 2003), whose future extent is not known (Fletcher, 2003). As Orlikowski (1992) points out, technology-enabled transformations do not unfold deterministically, but rather underlie a complex feedback and interaction between institutional properties, technology, and human agents (see also DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Fountain, 2001). Through human agents’ creation and interaction with technology, institutional prop-
Properties are engrained, which in turn shape the way in which humans interact with technology (Orlikowski, 1992). Furthermore, in the public sector, human agents interact within multiple institutional settings and with the civil society at large, which leads to repercussions regarding the technologies involved, as well as the institutional and societal settings (Cresswell & Pardo, 2001; Groenlund, 2001). Predictions regarding how this process is going to unfold for e-Gov are necessarily vague. Repeating the themes of former technology/growth models (Gibson & Nolan, 1974; Nolan, 1979), some scholars present similar schemes for e-Gov (Layne & Lee, 2001).

Others emphasize the relationship between operational and institutional change leading to increased integration and collaboration across agencies (Fountain, 2001). For higher bureaucracy IEE and for more citizen-centric orientation in government to occur (Bush, 2002), a high degree of intra-/interdepartmental, intra-/interagency, and intra-/interbranch integration has been identified as a prerequisite by European (Leitner, 2003; Traunmueller & Wimmer, 2003) and North American scholars and practitioners (Aldrich, Bertot, & McClure, 2002; Bertot, 2003; Forman, 2002). Both physical accessibility and intellectual approachability to information and services matter in this regard (Andersson & Groenlund, 2003).

E-Gov appears to have an impact on government “business processes.” A business process can be thought of as a high-level flow of activity and as a set of tasks with a logical relationship geared towards a desired result or product (Davenport & Short, 1990). Business processes such as procurement, taxation, contracting, or licensing can contain up to hundreds or thousands of coordinated and connected workflows (Stohr & Zhao, 1997). Through e-Gov projects, those high-level processes, along with their detail-level workflows, seem to undergo increasingly comprehensive changes leading to what has been called “business-process change” (BPC) (Balutis, 2001b; Beaumaster, 2002; Ho, 2002; Layne & Lee, 2001; Relyea, 2002; Scholl, 2003a; Whitson & Davis, 2001), the extent of which has not been documented in the literature. BPC in government may follow paths and patterns similar to BPC observed in the private sector (Scholl, 2003a), in which case the wealth of literature along with the practical lessons learned in that sector could benefit the unfolding of e-Gov-induced BPC.

In a comprehensive exploratory study, three main areas were empirically researched: (1) current implementation practices, (2) sourcing approaches, and (3) the strategic thrust of large e-Gov projects. While the first two areas have been discussed elsewhere (Scholl, 2003b, 2004), this paper focuses on the findings in the area of e-Gov strategy, objectives, focal areas, and motives, and its relation to BPC. The paper is organized as follows: First, a short review of the private-sector-related literature in the area of strategic thrust in BPC is recapitulated (Scholl, 2003a). From this literature, eight propositions are derived for further inquiry and assessment within an e-Gov context (School, 2003a). Second, the design of the exploratory study is detailed. Then, the findings for each proposition are summarized and discussed in context and relationship to each other. The paper concludes that empirical evidence exists for assuming e-Gov to induce major BPC. Also, by and large, the private-sector-based lessons learned seem to apply. Finally, future quantitative and theory-test-oriented research on the subject is outlined.
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