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Chapter XIV

Skills for Electronic Service Delivery in Public Agencies

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ABSTRACT

The text analyses the strategy of OECD countries in order to introduce the needed skills for launching e-government services at the national level. The chapter further establishes the four sets of e-government related skills that are needed within the three relevant communities of public servants: information technology community, information management community and service community. It additionally discusses the framework to identify skill gaps through the revision of different assessment toolkits. Finally, it offers an overview of how ICT-related skills can be outsourced. This chapter draws on documents, policy papers and interviews with experts and managers of national e-government strategies from OECD countries.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with the needed skills to implement an e-government strategy. It was commissioned by the Public Management Service [PUMA] of the OECD as part of its e-Government Task Force initiative. The present text, as an updated version, benefits from numerous comments and questions gathered from seminar participants and interviewees.[1] It highlights the most important strategies of OECD countries in relation to e-skills.

Although competencies and skills are used in the text interchangeably, competencies have a broader meaning. They are characteristics of an individual which underline performance or behavior at work. Competency is an observable, measurable pattern of skills, knowledge, abilities, behaviors and other characteristics that an individual needs in order to perform successfully work roles or occupational functions (Barker, 2001). According to this definition, general competencies could be oral communication, problem solving, customer service, while technical competencies are, for instance, infrastructure design, network management, and systems integration. In this chapter, the emphasis is placed on ICT- (Information and Communication Technology) related skills for top managers of public bureaucracies that deliver services electronically.

Two different dimensions have been assigned to electronic service delivery (ESD) or e-government (see Bovaird & Lenihan). One dimension refers to the electronic provision of services and the new capacity to collect, integrate and manage information for the use of the public or for tracking broad societal changes and evaluating governmental actions. Another dimension has a wider meaning. It implies the use of ICT to expand public space enabling the direct participation of stakeholders — citizens, businesses, mass media, NGOs (non-governmental organizations), and other levels of government — in government activities. For the sake of simplicity the concept of "e-government services" encompasses both dimensions in the text.

ESD needs that the right skills are in place. The search for generic skills for the Information Age Society is mostly the concern of Anglo-Saxon countries like Australia, Hong Kong, the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom. In other OECD countries, the work on skills is not emerging, or the search for the right skills is narrowed down to ICT-specific skills for the IT community. While there is recognition that government strategists and business managers are not always fully aware of the implications (software, hardware, relationships with other stakeholders and citizens) of the ICT, the content of training of these professionals lack IT-related contents. Different reasons can be offered for this. Some interviewees have underlined the strong division among IT specialists and generalists and the relatively high control of the formers not only on the technical aspects of e-government strategies but also on the non-technical dimension, i.e., on the overall service strategy. In many non Anglo Saxon countries, the launch of e-government service has been seen as an opportunity for IT specialists to control service delivery.

In order to tackle the issue on skills, four questions will be addressed in the chapter. How can different groups or communities of public servants be identified in relation to e-government services? What ICT skills are linked to different communities? Which instruments could assess the existence of e-skills in those groups or communities? How could the gap of needed skills be filled?

COMMUNITIES OF PUBLIC SERVANTS AND E-GOVERNMENT

The introduction of ICT in the public sector to achieve e-government has facilitated the further specialization of different communities of professionals and has fostered the need of increasing communication needs among communities.