Chapter 5.16
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 powerfully 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:

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