

**Chapter XV**

e-Government in Sweden: Centralization, Self-Service and Competition

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The Internet has often been envisioned to have decentralizing effects. Not only should the technology in theory have the potential for making it easier to live and run companies in rural areas, but also this is in fact supposed to happen on such a scale that the countryside would achieve a development similar to that in urban areas. In Europe, and certainly in Sweden, governments—long before Internet use became widespread—established policies to help development in rural areas. It seems then that the Internet would come as a welcome gift, as it is supposed to facilitate such policies; indeed rather make them obsolete if it in fact were true that Internet use would inherently lead to decentralization.

This chapter reviews a study concerned with how Swedish government agencies used IT during the period of 1985-1999—to centralize or to decentralize?

The reason for studying government agencies is that the Swedish policy in support of regional development is meant to balance other developments that are negative for the region, such as the long way to markets, negative population growth, etc. This policy competes with other goals, such as economic goals and incentives for the individual government organization. The study was undertaken to see what the practical result of all these different policies is.

In this chapter, we first briefly review the background, which includes a shift in attitudes for government agencies towards more of economic incentives, a generally more business-like approach. We go on to present our research questions and hypotheses. The results are then illustrated by a review of one of the four organizations studied, the AMV (the Swedish National Labor Market Agency), which is the organization officially celebrated as the e-Government role model for the future. Finally, we present our conclusions (which come from all four organizations studied, with AMV being the most prominent example).

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GOVERNMENT AGENCIES, REGIONAL POLICY AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Over the past 15 years, the role of Swedish national government agencies has changed dramatically. Agencies converted to government-owned companies, privatization and deregulations have meant that size, tasks and the terms of operations have changed fundamentally. In particular, the possibilities to use government agencies as actors in the regional policy have become less open. Previously, starting in the 1970s, relocation of government agencies to promote employment in regions where private business move out or is generally weak was an often-used measure.

There were two main reasons for the relocation strategy. The first was to slow down the expansion in the capital area, for the purpose of achieving a more balanced development nationwide. The second was that the government wanted to achieve positive effects for the recipient cities. By relocating government agencies, it was hoped that also other organizations that had close cooperation with those agencies would follow, thus increasing the positive effect (Statskontoret, 1989, pp. 9-21).

Since the early 1990s, the government sector has gone through dramatic change. Work has been rationalized and central government tasks have been decentralized to a regional or local level. Management by goals and results rather than by detailed instruction has been implemented at all levels. Government organizations have been reorganized or closed, government-owned companies have been privatized. Due to the severe financial crisis in central government, encountered in the early 1990s, efficiency has been emphasized. The goal of the regional policy is now to support growth in all regions for the purpose of contributing to the national growth (Reko 1997, p. 9).

In the late 1980s, the Ministry of the Interior emphasized three basic goals and incentives that would permeate the reform of the administration. At the ideological level, civil servants were to work more flexibly with a customer focus, rather than strictly abiding by the regulatory framework. There was an ambition to getting rid of the civil servant hallmark as a highly formal red-tapist. By focusing on the customer, government could fulfill the second goal, a service spirit permeating the organization. Complementing these two goals was an economic one; improved efficiency on the part of the civil servants. This was to be achieved by computerization and organizational change (Stjernberg, 1989, pp. 25-26).

In conclusion, the current goals replace detailed government control by customer service and efficiency.

AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The overall goal of the research project "IT in Government Administration—A Means for Centralization or Decentralization?" was to investigate how IT use has affected regional and local branches of central government agencies: localization, organization, employment and individual workplaces' role in local, regional and national networks. We studied:

- Changes in organizational structure concerning geographic localization of departments and tasks, changes in transportation of information and people.
- The way these changes had affected individual workplaces' work functions, work content and role in local, regional and national networks.
- How the changes had affected service quality and accessibility.

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