

# Communities and Evaluation of E-Government Services

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## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In this article, I would like to reflect on a potential contribution of the theory of communities of practice to the evaluation of e-government services. Up to date, the adoption of e-government in local, regional, and national institutions could be characterized as a process guided by a need to improve efficiency and speed in the delivery of services to citizens. However, this might have implications to different groups of citizens who might like to use services, in other words, to become users. The theory of communities of practice could provide a framework by which e-government services (and, more particularly, e-government Web sites) could be assessed with a view of facilitating participation and inclusion.

## E-GOVERNMENT

Broadly speaking, e-government can be defined as a set of activities supported by information systems with the aim to improve relationships between government institutions and citizens (Heichlinger, 2004). E-government implies the use of technology to enhance access to and delivery of government services to benefit citizens, business partners, and employees. Worldwide, technological advances combined with an emerging interest in citizen participation have led institutions to embark in implementing information services for citizens online. Services include general information on the use of services, facilities for online payment, specialist advice, and news.

The aim of e-government is to enhance public participation in decision making. Worldwide varieties of e-government Web sites have been set up, providing services and information at different levels (local, regional, or national). One example of a

national e-government Web site can be seen at directgov (<http://www.directgov.org.uk>). On this Web site, there are different sources of information, which aim at providing support for different groups, including disabled, unemployed, and the elderly. The information is also organized around common themes (i.e., caring for someone, living abroad, etc.). An example of a local e-government Web site is that of Hull City Council (<http://www.hullcc.gov.uk/>). On this Web site, individuals can get up to date about new services, find job opportunities, make payments on existing services, and gain an overview of what the city council can do for them.

It is difficult to assess how distinct e-government Web sites are from commercial Web sites. Both types offer information and transactions to potential customers. In fact, one emerging issue of concern is how e-government services can contribute to develop integral approaches to e-government, by which the goals of inclusion and participation can be assessed and developed.

## COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE TO ASSESS E-GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES

A perspective on how to achieve the above goals can be developed by using the theory of communities of practice. The theory states that communities are groups of individuals which interact to pursue shared enterprises (Wenger, 1998). Embedded in this notion is a process of *learning* by which individuals gain competence through participating, continuously exchanging experiences and negotiating the meanings of what they see as their practice.

According to Wenger (1998), learning is not only about knowing but living meaningfully, developing a satisfying identity, and altogether being human. Learn-

ing implies a careful balance between engagement and experience. This means that people should have competence to interact with others, but also be able to bring new experiences to share. This ensures that a community's learning is adequately oriented in relation to what happens in society. A component that enables this learning to happen is that of "boundary objects" (Wenger, 1998). These elements help communities coordinate activities and interact with the rest of the world. For individuals, knowledge of boundary objects could constitute a condition of membership of the community.

Following the above, a possibility to evaluate the contribution of e-government Web sites could be developed. E-government Web sites could be assessed in terms of:

- How they enable emerging communities of citizens to interact and learn from new experiences;
- How people can share information; and
- How people can gain competence to enter into groups that may help them feel inclusive and participatory.

A way of assessing the appropriateness of e-government Web sites toward these aspects could be to explore how certain boundary objects are managed, for example, how *online applications* could be seen as an object that communicates two different communities (citizens and government officers). Around this object, some additional support could be given to both communities, including:

- Awareness raising about its relevance
- Procedures to fill applications and processes
- Experiences from both users and processors
- Knowledge about content.

This support to manage boundary objects is about ensuring *participation* in communities as much as use of these objects (Wenger, 1998). Although general, these aspects could inform further research on the evaluation of e-government Web sites. They could also open up opportunities for discussion with the aim to improve the delivery of services to citizens.

## CONCLUSION AND FUTURE TRENDS

In this article, it has been argued that some general ideas of the theory of communities of practice could provide insights to evaluate e-government initiatives. This could apply in particular to existing e-government Web sites at the national and local level. It is not assumed that e-government contributes (or should) to foster the development of communities. Often, communities emerge to allow people to learn, and to *become*. Recognizing which groups of citizens could be supported with e-government services and enabling them to interact via appropriate boundary objects could lead those responsible for e-government initiatives to improve participation of citizens in government affairs.

## REFERENCES

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## KEY TERMS

**Boundary Object:** An element that enables community members to participate together and communicate with the outside of the community.

**Competence:** A description of the membership of a community of practice according to the degree of learning about practice in the community.

**E-Government:** Set of activities that aim to improve relationships between government institutions and citizens with the help of information systems and technologies.

**Evaluation:** A process of finding the value of information services or products according to the needs of their consumers or users.

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