Best Practice in E–Government

B

Helmut Drüke
Capgemini Germany Ltd., Germany

INTRODUCTION

The pressure of modernization does not stop at national boundaries—in this respect it is universal and secular. In some regions of the world the pressure of change is particularly extreme (e.g., in Eastern Europe) where the transformation of the administration from a state socialist to a democratic institution is taking place under the enormous time pressure of complying with the new national and international standards and catching up with the global economy. Another example of a country in transformation that is extremely interested in studying best practices is China where a more efficient public administration is required to support the newly installed market economy whereas e-democracy is no issue at the moment.

In view of this starting point for the universal pressure of change and reform, the responsible decision-makers are often eager to model the direction and implementation of their reforms on the best local communities. The high level of interest in the results of various benchmarking studies among local community representatives stems from this pressure and a great uncertainty about the future of public administration.

Actors and experts throughout the world agree that learning from and transfer of good practices internationally can contribute to the goal of global co-operation in e-government, which is a priority of the World Summit on the Information Society. In its Action Plan, the participants of the World Summit defined as an important action to "support international cooperation initiatives in the field of e-government, in order to enhance transparency, accountability and efficiency at all levels of government" (WSIS, 2003).

In its "Communication" of September 26, 2003 on "The Role of E-government for Europe's Future" (European Commission, 2003) the Commission of the European Communities stresses the huge benefit of initiating an exchange of good practice.

Best practices encompass technological, organizational, legal, and training elements, they require long-term commitment of all key actors involved, and they illustrate tangible benefits and results. Exchange of experience and replication of best practices can bring cost-savings in moving to broad take-up. It also prepares for future interoperability and interworking between administrations. (p. 21)

The following discussion aims to introduce a theoretical approach which avoids the limitations of the dominant transfer theories of the "one best way" (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1989; Ohmae, 1990; Womack, Jonas, & Roos, 1990) on the one hand and "path dependence" (Arthur, 1994; Freyssenet, Maier, Shimizu, & Volpato, 1998; Leipold, 1996; Pierson, 1998) on the other hand, and which creates a perspective for practical action in e-government. Whereas the one best way theory regards the adoption of superior concepts as the royal route to overcoming existing inadequacies, the theory of path dependence sees hardly any possibility to adopt solutions from other national environments—it considers that the bonds of the decisions of the past and inherited structures are too strong.

Therefore, a clear understanding of the opportunities and limits of best practice orientation and adoption gives a clear orientation of what way to go in increasing organizational performance. The basic question is if it is advisable and feasible to adopt practices of a well-performing authority by a less-performing authority in the public administration.

Before presenting empirical material on the question of what a good practice in e-government consists of it is feasible to discuss on a theoretical level principle problems with the concept of best practice.

BACKGROUND

In the current discussion about the best way for public authorities to develop to modernize administration with the help of e-government, familiar thought patterns from discussions about the prospects of the industrial society in the 1980s or the forms of New Public Management in the 1990s are apparent.

There is often an impression that there can be a generally valid concept of modernization with goals that are defined by a best practice model, and that this model is the final goal of the development of the public administration from a Weber-type administration–characterized by increased effectiveness due to distribution of

competence, a highly formal division of labor, a strict hierarchical structure, impartiality, specific control mechanisms or the lifelong staff remuneration principle—to a flexible organization similar to an economic enterprise with customer orientation, holistic forms of work, performance-oriented remuneration and career patterns and shallow hierarchies.

According to the convergence theory[1], an increasingly trans-national development model for the public sector can be expected in the distant future. Then, the public authorities would be under enormous pressure to act, but at the same time without any clear idea of what action is appropriate, so decision-makers would look to the best practice models and imitate their solutions, thus gaining respite in their complex decision-making situation. Best practice models would then form the reference point for their own decisions on the shape of e-government.

From a theoretical point of view, there are several questions about such a convergence theory. First of all, the fundamental question of when a solution is considered a best practice must be addressed. Obviously, a high degree of abstraction is needed to award existing solutions the epithet of the one best way. The abstraction must transcend the distinctly national specific differences in culture, tradition, state structure, language, attitudes, economic structure, etc. The significance of all of these factors for the structure of society and the state has been discussed in the theories of the national innovation system (Dosi, D'Andrea, & Zysman, 1989) and new institutional economics (Soskice, 1994).

Moreover, best practice is a moving target. Possible solutions which are emulated by a latecomer may already be out of date. Best practices certainly evolve over time, as was impressively shown in the analysis of the development of the governance structures of the U.S. economy (Hollingsworth & Streeck, 1994).

This leads to questions which are very relevant to practical applications. If a solution has been identified as a best practice, can it be copied? What role is played by path dependency (i.e., conditioning by the structure that has grown historically)? Classifying solutions as best practice thus often has an ahistorical component, and this can make them devoid of life and soul in face of the historical development of structures and solutions. And the two concepts, modernization and best practice, are isolated from the different political, economic and cultural structures in which they are firmly embedded.

On the other hand, the concept of path dependency restricts learning to the inner potential of an organization. In that perspective, learning takes place if actors consider the inner potential of a choice, an institution as being limited. That leads to severe problems of operationalization of the concept of the path both in a diachronic and a synchronic perspective. Who determines what time frame to be considered to define the path that sets limits? Authors give different answers. In the transformation debate form socialist to market economy the proposals what has to be regarded as a path determining period differ from stressing the pre-socialist phase (Janos, 1984) to the most recent socialist experience (Crawford & Lijphart, 1997).

And in the synchronic perspective the discourse is not easier. How is it possible to identify those institutions that are decisive to define the path for the further development of an institution?

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ON BEST PRACTICE IN E-GOVERNMENT

Benchmarking studies are published all over the place. Web sites are assessed (Capgemini 2002, 2003, 2004), the e-readiness of countries is examined (Booz, Allen, & Hamilton, 2002) or the availability of services is analyzed (KEeLAN, 2004[2]; West, 2001).

But there exists also another type of analysis that focuses on organizational issues (Millard et al., 2004), on special applications such as e-participation (Malkia, Anttiroiko, & Savolainen, 2004).

To check if a best-practice-model can be derived, six studies are presented that deal with the configuration of success factors of e-government on the local level.

Local E-Government in a Management Perspective

The project of the British research group from the organizations Socitm and I&DeA on the state of development and the development paths for local e-government in an international perspective regards the phenomenon of the "virtual town hall" especially from a management perspective (Socitm & I&DeA, 2002). The main focus is on the question of what has been achieved internationally and what remains to be done. Research teams from the participating 14 countries contribute best-practices examples or typical cases. The study by the country teams and the evaluation by the British team of authors were oriented towards an analysis concept which expresses a comprehensive conceptual approach (cf. Table 1).

Such an approach based on the complexity of e-government projects is necessary to grasp the respective phenomenon with its specific characteristics, and the only possibility to adopt the consistent maxim for action:

For the majority, life on the local e-government train will be rather chaotic; identifying opportunities and

8 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:
www.igi-global.com/chapter/best-practices-government/11495

Related Content

Critical Success Factors of Open Government and Open Data at Local Government Level in Indonesia
Djoko Sigit Sayogoand Sri Budi Cantika Yuli (2018). *International Journal of Electronic Government Research (pp. 28-43).*
www.irma-international.org/article/critical-success-factors-of-open-government-and-open-data-at-local-government-level-in-indonesia/211201

Determining the Accessibility of e-Government Websites in Sub-Saharan Africa Against WCAG 2.0 Standard
Silas Formunyuy Verkijikaand Lizette De Wet (2017). *International Journal of Electronic Government Research (pp. 52-68).*
www.irma-international.org/article/determining-the-accessibility-of-e-government-websites-in-sub-saharan-africa-against-wcag-20-standard/181281

Towards a Design Rationale for Inclusive eGovernment Services
Heiko Hornungand M. Cecília C. Baranauskas (2011). *International Journal of Electronic Government Research (pp. 1-20).*
www.irma-international.org/article/towards-design-rationale-inclusive-egovernment/56096

Factors Influencing Intention to Use e-Government Services Among Citizens in Malaysia
Ooh Kim Lean, Suhaiza Zailani, T. Ramayahand Yudi Fernando (2010). *Citizens and E-Government: Evaluating Policy and Management (pp. 334-359).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/factors-influencing-intention-use-government/42565

Call Centre Evolution in the Digital Government
V. Ambriola, S. Bertagniniand L. Pratesi (2008). *Electronic Government: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications (pp. 3980-3986).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/call-centre-evolution-digital-government/9977